

# DARK HORIZONS



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# DARK HORIZONS

## JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH FANTASY SOCIETY CONTENTS

ILLUMINATION by DAVID SUTTON .....	2
(Editorial)	
AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN DONALDSON by STEVEN PAULSEN .....	3
(On the man and his work)	
THE HOUSE OF AUNTY BERENICE by NIK MORTON .....	9
(Fiction)	
THE CONSERVATORY CHAIR by JON BYE .....	12
(Verse)	
Beyond THE THRESHOLD (part one) by BRIAN J. FROST .....	13
(Door symbolism in fantasy)	
THE GOD OF CLAY by JOEL LANE .....	19
(Fiction)	
THE CONSOLATIONS OF HORROR by TOM LIGOTTI .....	26
(Our motives for enjoying horror explored)	
ABSENCE by JOEL LANE .....	32
(Verse)	
BEYOND THIS HORIZON - READERS' LETTERS .....	39
THE FAIRY HILLS by SUSAN TAYNHILL .....	36
(Verse)	

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# ILLUMINATION



## David Sutton

In case everyone has forgotten by now, the previous issue of this magazine was an all-fiction number which was, it seems, pleasurable received by most of the people who cared to write in with their comments. To find out what people did say, please turn to the letter column at the tail-end of this issue. Besides letters, I asked for readers to vote on their favorite three stories and the response was sufficiently large to allow me to present the results: in 3rd place was Ramsey Campbell's Jack in the Box; in 2nd place was David Riley's The Shadow by the Altar; and the story most enjoyed was Willy Wolfsberger's The Attic. The story was also enjoyed by Karl 'sener, who has selected it to appear in this year's annual *YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES* from Daw Books, where it will find the wider audience such an intriguing tale deserves.

On the subject of fiction, DH27 contains two stories. The God of Clay is an evocative and surreal fantasy from Joel Lane, who I am increasingly finding is a writer of great depth and passion; see also his poem *Absence elsewhere* in this issue. Mik Morton contributes The House of Aunty Berenice, a bizarre and surreal ghost story. Other poems in this issue are Jon Bye's

The Conservatory Chair and Susan Tannahill's The Fairy Hills.

Tom Ligotti, who is more well known for his fiction in England, contributes a fascinating article, The Consolations of Horror, while Brian Frost explores door symbolism in fantasy in Beyond the Threshold, part one. Finally our lead feature this time is an Interview with Stephen Donaldson, conducted on his recent tour of Australia by Steven Paulsen.

This issue may well set a trifle light on the illustrative side. This was dictated by the extra wordage squeezed into the 36 pages. The addition of a second story (a request for more fiction in the regular JU's was made by several readers) has also inevitably made its mark.

Your opinions and comments on this latest issue will be welcomed for possible inclusion in the letter column. I am very pleased with the level of response and am sorry to have had to edit some of the letters and cut others entirely from *Beyond This Horizon*. But don't let that deter you from writing - the more comment the more I can vary the column and know how many of you feel about the magazine.

# An Interview With STEPHEN DONALDSON

## Steven Paulsen

STEPHEN DONALDSON feels he writes not escapist fantasy, but a challenging, demanding kind of fantasy, in which readers find a different view of 'the inner condition' than that found in most mainstream literature.

His success with the Thomas Covenant series did not come easily. In fact, *LORD FOUL'S RAYE* was rejected by every fiction publisher in the United States - including the people who now publish it! He has the paperwork in his files to prove it.

Raised in a town called Miraj in India, he has developed very strong views about his personal moral philosophy.

PAULSEN: Why did you want to become a writer?

DONALDSON: Because I discovered at a very keen time in my life that writing was far more exciting than anything else I could possibly do. I have always been very verbal and I have always, in one sense or another, lived on stories. There were times when I was really young, when I think I kind of drifted sort of halfway into fantasy worlds to carry me through a crisis. You know, like when I was four and five and six years - kids can do that sort of thing. They can spin an imaginary construct which helps them to cope with a real life problem. Well, you know, I've done a lot of that sort of thing.

And when I discovered how much more exciting stories were if I did the work to write them down - how much more they did for me and how much more I liked the stories - as soon as I made that connection, there

was no turning back. That hit me. I had this very strong recognition experience of feeling that that was the right thing for me to do. That doesn't necessarily mean I was good at it. There was no proof anywhere that I would be good enough to have a career as a writer. I just knew that I didn't want a career as anything else. Fortunately I turned out to be good, but it took a long time to prove that.

PAULSEN: India is a fascinating country - it's both beautiful and ugly. Did growing up there influence your writing in any way? I know you drew from Sanskrit for some of the names in the Covenant books, and I see you wear what looks like a Sikh bracelet.

DONALDSON: Ah well it is...

Not in a literal way but in an emotional way, I think growing up in India influenced me a great deal. And it's exactly on the kind of basis you described - the combination of beauty and ugliness. I don't think it's as much beauty, myself, as romance or exoticism. India is a very exotic, romantic and majestic country in many ways: immensely colourful people, extremely dramatic landscapes and what-not, a very complex ornate kind of culture and art. And on the other hand the most crushing human poverty that you can possibly imagine. It just numbs the mind to consider what people go through in India.

It seems clear to me that that shaped the whole graph of stories together. I mean that's what I write. I write very romantic, exotic, melodramatic, magical kinds of stories in which very grim and painful things happen to people, and a very serious exploration of the consequences of violence

is undertaken. So ah, you know, I think that comes because of the kind of mind I have, and I think I have that kind of mind because I grew up in India.

PAULSEN: Were you influenced by any other writers in particular?

DONALDSON: Well the writers I'm most conscious of being influenced by are Joseph Conrad and Henry James.

Conrad because he showed that you can write essentially melodramatic stories, stories with lots of good plot and adventure, suspense, and still write them for very serious purposes. Stories like: *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *THE NIGER OF THE MARCIAQ*, *THE SECRET AGENT*, or *MISTOMO*. They're all stories with a lot of suspense and a lot of adventure in the plot, and yet are used in very serious ways. And that was partially because I love to read suspenseful and adventurous stories, and yet my goals are very serious and it's nice to have a touch up with the kind of thing you are trying to do.

Henry James because he is a beautiful structuralist - the way he puts the pieces of a story together so they balance and fit and almost chime, is an instance of high art I think. And I aspire to that skill as a structurer. I'm very conscious of how stories are structured, and how my own are put together, and I want to do it that well.

PANISE: Who do you respect in contemporary fiction?

DONALDSON: Well oddly enough... I mean I have read certain of the classics in science fiction and fantasy and I liked them a lot. But as general practitioners they write crap. They seem to be mostly people in my generation that I enjoy. For example, C. J. Cherryh is a writer whose work astonishes me. She's a wonderful writer. Patricia McKillip, Gene Wolfe is a little older, but is an enormously talented man. Sydnye Van Scoc - I don't know if anyone knows who Sydnye Van Scoc is, but I hope someday they will. All of these people are, oddly enough, around my own age, around my writing generation.

I think somehow or another, the doing in science fiction and then later fantasy which occurred ten or maybe fifteen or twenty years ago, opened the door for new people who had a more sophisticated approach to the skills of language and character presentation than some of the old-timers. People like Frank Belknap Long,

who are famous and have long and successful writing careers, and yet the stuff seems very brittle and unappealing to a reader like myself. He doesn't care about writing good sentences, he just gets the words down on paper so that the story will be there. He doesn't care about convincing characters or character development and that kind of stuff, he just wants to present his own ideas. It was popular for a long time, but it just never satisfies me.

In the course of events, I still read a fair amount of mainstream literature, and in that way I'm going back historically filling the gaps in my education - there's Sir Walter Scott novels I'm still reading because I think they're wonderful. Whereas, I find that American contemporary mainstream novels just leave me cold. I read a fair amount of British novelists, people like Paul Scott, Anthony Powell appeal to me a great deal. But the American mainstream writer strikes me as being in a desmiserable condition. I don't know what those guys think they're doing.

PAULSEN: Do you read a lot of books?

DONALDSON: I read as many books as I can. Unfortunately I'm a very slow reader, so it takes me longer to get through books than almost anybody I know. But I love to read: I cannot sit in a room and just look at the wall, I have to read something. I'm a compulsive reader and I read every chance I get.

PANISE: From the inscription inside the cover of *THE WORLDED LAND*, it would appear Lester Del Rey had some hand in the birth of the second chronicles. Would you care to elaborate?

DONALDSON: Well Lester was my editor - he was the man who discovered me - and he was my editor throughout the first *Chronicles* and well into the start of writing the second.

The inscription is intended in its essence as a sort of private in-joke for Lester's benefit, because by that time it was clear to all of us (chuckle) that he was never going to succeed at making me do anything. I'm probably the first writer he ever took on who is as stubborn as he is. "I had some epic battles about all kinds of things throughout the books, and he found that I was susceptible to persuasion, but that I could never be forced to do something."

So that's the kind of thing he and I laugh about over a few beers late at night.

And of course, then there's the phrase that we have in the U.S.: Shucks, the devil made me do it. I was naving on that, because that's the kind of joke that Lester would find very funny.

Nevertheless it is also true, that he helped trigger me into thinking about doing the second Chronicles. While we were finishing work together on **THE POWER THAT PRESERVES**, he was thinking a lot more about the future than I was, and he felt that I ought to write a sequel. I didn't think that was a particularly good idea, but he kept sending me suggestions for a sequel.

**PAULSEN:** You saw Lester Del Rey kept sending you suggestions for a sequel to the first Chronicles - you didn't have a plan for the whole series then? - because the first Chronicles tended to fit into a very neat set.

**DONALDSON:** Well they are a very neat set. I planned that whole set long before I ever started writing them. My central motivation for writing the first Chronicles was the ending of **THE POWER THAT PRESERVES**. So I built that backwards until I was ready to write **LORD FOUL'S BANE**. But of course I had the whole set in mind.

The same thing was true in the second Chronicles. My reason for writing the story is the ending of **WHITE GOLD WIELDER**, and I built that story backwards until I was ready to start writing **THE WOUNDED LAND**. So in that sense both stories are equally unified, they are structured in totally different ways, but from my point of view they are equally unified.

**PAULSEN:** There is a different feel or style change between the first and second Chronicles. Was this intentional or just a natural development of your own style?

**DONALDSON:** Well - see that's a tough question because to my mind, in retrospect, I do not like the way the first half of **THE WOUNDED LAND** is written. It doesn't read right to me. And if anything, it seems like a stylistic step back. What was actually happening was that I re-wrote that bloody material so many different times from so many different points of view trying to get a handle on it, that it stopped being very spontaneous, it became... it has much less flow than I look for in my own writing usually. It isn't until about half way through **THE WOUNDED LAND** that it begins to pick up and come to life for me as a reader. So I think, you know, because of the trouble that I was having getting the story started on the right foot, the



beginning of **THE WOUNDED LAND** is sort of inferior to the rest of the story. Once the story does start to come to life, then it seems to me that it goes on flowing very well, and I'm quite happy with the results the rest of the way.

I am confident there are ways I'm improving steadily as a writer, but that does not always show itself on a sentence by sentence level. There are many things that go into being a writer and a story teller separate from just choices you make about which word to use or which sentence to use: the kinds of ideas that are evolved, the insights into your characters and into dilemmas, the way these are balanced against each other, all has to do with something else. The words are only a vehicle for these things. And I do feel like I'm getting stronger as a writer in those other ways. Of course half of **THE WOUNDED LAND** does not strike me as being particularly well written however.

**PAULSEN:** Which of your books appeal-

to you most?

DONALDSON: Well it's a different case for different books. Just in terms of the pure writing, I am happiest with *THE DOOR THAT PRESERVES*. There are times when I go back and re-read that book that it seems to me that it's written better than I know how to write. And that's a very good feeling. I like that. I wish I could do it a lot.

In other ways *THE ONE TREE* is special to me because of that shift to Linden Avery on centre stage. That was a vital and necessary development, and a very risky development under the circumstances, and I feel good about the way it worked out. It's all on a different level; that's special to me.

PAULSEN: Thomas Covenant is a readily identifiable character - sometimes he's hated and other times pitied. Was there someone you based him on?

DONALDSON: No, I do not base my characters on people that I know, I don't base my stories on circumstances that I know, and I almost never draw on bodies of information that I'm familiar with. Leprosy is the only exception. I make things up. That's because it's necessary to me as a writer. I'm the kind of person who when he starts to report something that he knows, it falls dead on the paper - it doesn't come to life for the people who read it. It reads like reportage instead of like creation.

Other writers are very different - I know of, for instance, writers who must draw on their own experience. And if they do that then it comes to life on the page, but if they try to make something up it doesn't sound convincing. For me the only way that I can be convincing is to make it up.

It's true in every way that I had no experience with sailing vessels, but nevertheless most of my readers find that long passage on Starfare's Gem convincing. They believe that's a real vessel doing real sailing. You know, that's just how my imagination works; I've never done it. The same thing with the characters, I don't know anyone like Thomas Covenant - if I did I wouldn't be able to write about them.

PAULSEN: In your books, there seems to be a conflict between the need to act and a reluctance to act. Perhaps the conflicts a pacifist would face. Does this reflect a personal viewpoint?

DONALDSON: Well in a certain sense it's bound to. It wouldn't pervade the books so much if id didn't grow out of something deep in me. And I certainly feel that conflict myself between the feeling that it is wrong to act and it is wrong not to act, and you cannot foresee the implications of your actions, and if you want to act perfectly then the way you can do so is to know what all the consequences are going to be - but you can never know what all the consequences are going to be and you end up second-guessing yourself into a state of paralysis, or else you end up going along taking a rest permanently.

That's certainly something that I relate to strongly on a personal level. I am not literally what I call a pacifist, because it seems to me there are many valid struggles. For example, when the world was faced with a Hitler, I simply can't find myself saying, "See it is wrong to fight back." The world needs to be preserved, and you have to do certain kinds of things from time to time to preserve it. Nevertheless, even faced with a Hitler, I do not think I would be the person who's out there fighting. My pacifism is very much an internal or personal thing in which I distrust the destructive side of myself. And I do not particularly wish to train that destructive side of myself to use weapons, I do not want to give it a gun and let it go out and do what it feels like doing. And I'm going to seek in my personal life to lead a non-violent life as much as I absolutely can.

That kind of background actually, is responsible for the idea of the Unfettered Ones in the Land. I would like to believe in a society in which it is permissible to be like me, where as much as you may love the society or support the goals of the society, there are still certain kinds of things you cannot do, certain kinds of things you would prefer to do, but you have the impulse which makes you want to do them in private. I'd like a society in which that's okay. One of the things I like about the Land is these individual people who become the Unfettered Ones, who have a very private vision and want to pursue it alone. They are approved of by their society, they're given support and they're respected, instead of being treated like cowards, or thrown in jail, or told they're somehow anti-American or whatever. I don't think I'm anti-American at all, and yet an awful lot of other people are sure that I am, because of the way my private vision or morality leads me.

PAULSEN: Will there be a third Chron-

icale?

DONALDSON: Well the fact is, when I got the ideas for the second Chronicles so that I knew where the story would go, I also got the idea for a third Chronicle; what I call the last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant. In other words I know where the entire story is going. And in writing the second Chronicles, I have left room for myself to go on when and if I ever become ready. But the fact is I'm not ready now to tackle that story. It's a difficult story and I've been writing Covenant for ten years. And I have lots of ideas for things I'd like to do, and now seems to be a really good time to leave Covenant and Linden alone and do some other kinds of writing.

PAULSEN: Most of your readers know you for the Thomas Covenant books, but you have in fact written three other published short stories, and a crime novel under a pseudonym - Reid Stephens. Could you tell us about these please?

DONALDSON: Well first, I do want to say that the crime novel is not under a pseudonym because I'm trying to hide my authorship of the book. I'm proud of the book - I would be very happy to have it out in my name. My publishers feel that it is very difficult to market two completely different kinds of writing, fantasy and crime, under the same name, so they required me to put a pseudonym on the book.

So far the crime novel has been astonishingly unsuccessful, and I'm sure one of the reasons for that is because it doesn't have my name on it. Nevertheless, I really enjoyed it because it is, from a writer's point of view, it's the opposite end of the world from the kind of fantasy that I do. Instead of being very intense and high-cowered and operatic in its writing, it's colloquial, it's first-person, it's real-world, the characters are ones who conceal their passions instead of trying them out on stage for everybody to look at, the way they do in fantasy books.

It's very refreshing for me to tackle that kind of writing challenge. On the other hand, crime novels are very short and I don't have that many ideas for them, so I'm never going to have a major career as a crime novel writer. If I do one every four or five years, that'll be fine for me.

The short stories were all written right after I finished work on the first Chronicles. I was getting ready to move to New Mexico in 1977, and I had a couple of months to kill before I moved and was in a

position where I could start writing the second Chronicles. So I wrote essentially two short stories and a novella and had them published in 'The Magazine of Fantasy And Science Fiction' back in the late seventies. And since then, I haven't done any other writing except for Covenant until about this time last year when I embarked on a series of short stories - a series in the sense that I wrote them one after another but not connected. I've written four more short stories, and the fact is they're all now in the process of being collected into a book which I think will be released about this time next year. So that'll bring into print all of my shorter works up to that time.

PAULSEN: Where does GILDEN-FIRE fit into all this?

DONALDSON: GILDEN FIRE is essentially an out-take from THE ILLARTH WAR. When I finished writing THE ILLARTH WAR way back when, it was over 900 pages in manuscript. As much as Lester Del Rev wanted to publish it, it was just too long. He had an upper limit of 670 pages that he could handle, and I just had to cut it down to that. Now that wasn't easy. I accepted the responsibility because I could see that the manuscript was over-written. But after I had boiled and trimmed and done everything I could think of to do, I still only had 150 pages, and I had eighty or ninety pages to go. Eventually the only way I could find to cut those last pages out, was to trim out one episode from Korik's mission to Seareach in THE ILLARTH WAR. Now I accepted the necessity of doing that, and it did seem to me that it did not seriously damage the story to trim out that one episode.

But I've always been very fond of the material. It gives background about the Bloodguard that you can't get anywhere else, and I developed the characters of a couple of minor lords that I liked a lot and always regretted not being able to develop further. So when I was given the opportunity to restore that to print, I was happy to do it. It's not a complete story, it is just an episode, and unless you've read THE ILLARTH WAR, GILDEN-FIRE won't make any sense at all. But having read THE ILLARTH WAR, it will kind of fill in a little information that you can't get anywhere else.

PAULSEN: Would you like to see your books filmed?

DONALDSON: No...

I wouldn't prevent anybody from filming them. It's just that I'm in a no-win position where films are concerned. No matter how terrific the movie is, it has to be definition be different from what I had in mind. Because a movie is a different form of communication, and in order to do it, it must follow its own rules and techniques, instead of following my rules and techniques. Mine are prose rules. So no matter how brilliantly it might be done, it would have to disappoint me because it wouldn't be what I had in mind.

Nevertheless, it could be terrific - it could also be terrible. It depends entirely on who tries to make the movie; whether they're good enough to pull it off. And that's why I wouldn't prevent someone from trying, there's always the chance that they would do a good job. But good or bad it wouldn't please me.

PAULSEN: I know you put in appearances at the odd convention or two. Do you identify with science fiction and fantasy fandom?

DONALDSON: Well I didn't even know such a thing existed until I became a published writer myself. Of course I was over thirty years old. I don't think that real hard-core fandom is something you can get into at that age of life. It's something that people grow into from a younger perspective, and then they develop the friendships and everything else that carries them through when they get to my age. I enjoy going to conventions, but four or five a year is enough for me.

PAULSEN: In which country are your books most popular?

DONALDSON: Well I'm certainly more highly regarded in England than in the U.S.

But for some reason or another, in the U.K. I'm taken very seriously, and I sell better there too. *WHITE GOLD WIELDER* was the number one bestseller in England in hardcover in January and February when it first came out. I've never been a number one best-seller in the U.S.

PAULSEN: Do you know how many books you've sold?

DONALDSON: Ah... no. And that's partly because I never see the figures for things like the German translation or, you know there's been lots of translations and I don't have figures for any of them. I have rough figures for the U.S. and Britain, and it seems clear - at least in English - that the six books together have sold around ten-million copies. So it averages out to a little more than a million copies per book, but the fact is *LORD FOUL'S BANE* carries more than its share and the rest are all somewhat less than that.

PAULSEN: What do you find is the most gratifying thing as a writer?

DONALDSON: One very gratifying thing is just the excitement of writing itself. There are ways in which this is very much a self-sustaining kind of way to work, because the more you write, the better you write, the better it feels the more you write.

One a completely different level, one of the most gratifying things is having people read and care about your work. That's hard to replace - seeing so many people around the world who actually care what I do. That's a rare and valuable thing.

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(This interview was first published in,  
"The Cygnus Chronicler, Australia 1994").

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# The House Of Aunty Berenice

Nik Morton

PURPLE was etched beneath her wide eyes. The slightly built girl in the shadowy doorway wore an eggshell-blue dress and apparently nothing else. Some people answer and look as if they're truly at home, in body and spirit; somehow she didn't seem to belong, not here in this dilapidated house, not in shadow.

"Hello," Swan greeted her, conscious of his total lack of originality. He removed his brown trilby, reassured by the touch of the felt brim. Why be concerned about showing freshness to her, why impress a stranger? "I'm looking for a Miss Winkworth — she used to live here..." What an utterness he was making of it! Affected by the presence of this slip of a girl!

She opened the door a little further, as though reluctant to admit daylight, anxious to preserve the shadows. He studied the silent puzzlement in her chestnut-brown eyes. "I'm an investigator," he began and withdrew a perspex card. "She's her late uncle's beneficiary..."

Long auburn hair shimmering, she nodded and beckoned with slim fingers for him to enter.

Swan cast a final apprehensive look up at the shabby Georgian facade. Probably his over-active imagination, but he could feel the charged atmosphere, a palpable thing, as he stepped over the threshold.

What little wallpaper the hallway possessed was peeling off the damp walls, baring cracked alabaster. Cobwebs loomed everywhere ... Strangely, the air was not musty; it seemed chill, sharp, a smell like hoar frost; tangible, air in suspension.

Her shapely body tended to flow beneath the dress; hips and buttocks rolled provocatively yet she appeared blissfully unaware

of her sexuality, giving him the fanciful impression of someone fragile and un-earthly.

Dust and grit moved under his feet. He shouted: "Wait!" Voice echoing. "We can talk here."

She turned, a crease of disapproval marring her brow. "You should know better than to shout," she whispered softly. "Aunty will hear you. We don't want that, do we?" Her eyes lanced up at the flaking ceiling.

Inquisitively, he followed her gaze. "Aunty?" he queried, unbuttoning his raincoat.

"You're my Knight Errant. You need not trouble yourself with Aunty Berenice. She died two years ago..." And she turned gracefully on her bare feet and resumed her interrupted journey.

Everything pointed to her being slightly mad, but he was curious. She spoke intelligibly; her mind seemed synchronised, for she had said her aunt died two years ago, and that coincided with Abigail Winkworth's disappearance... Smiling to himself, he felt his revolver snug in its holster. She was small and harmless...

At the end of the hall she waited by a woodworm-pitted door. Through the circular skylight, noonday sun played on her wan, high cheekbones. Dust motes glided aimlessly in the sunbeam.

Dryness increased in his mouth as he noticed the dark aureoles of her breasts and the darker triangle beneath her flimsy dress. Yet she appeared unconcerned, innocent, and his cynical mind found it difficult to grasp.

Wordlessly, she took his hand warmly

in hers. A kind of frisson traced his spine, tightened his stomach muscles. Was this feeling primitive, merely genetic nipping, or something more profound and spiritual?

She led him into a bare, sour-looking green room whose parquet floor was littered with cans of food. A naked light hung on flex from a damaged ceiling-rose, lent stark illumination.

Cut into the wall opposite was an archway, with a dark-stained wooden cellar door secured by a rusty bolt. Chopped up remains of a dining-table and chairs were stacked against one wall. An axe rested against the fireplace tiles; the grate contained crisp, black book-pages and furniture, while to the left stretched a ceiling-high bookcase, empty now, only a few books living forlorn and well-thumbed, threatened-looking... She must have read his features, for she said, "I can't eat books, but they can keep me warm and cook my tinned food..."

It was sunless in here, bleak. With an effort, he smiled and pointed to the bolted door. "Is that the wine cellar? Have you a good vintage locked away perhaps?"

"Her mouth twisted open. "It - it's dirty," she stammered, holding him back. "Anyway, there's no light..."

He shrugged. "I was just curious."

"And the bolt's jammed," she persisted.

Though mystified about the cellar, he switched the subject. Do you live entirely out of tins, then?" The concern in his voice was genuine. Lost waifs, scruffy urchins, hurt straws, he'd met them all - some were hysterical, others paranoid, and some were too caring society; but over these last two years he had hardened his heart against them all; 'till now. At the moment, as she looked wide-eyed at him, he could feel his legs becoming jelly.

"Usually I get something out of the deep freeze, but - " she sighed - "that's jammed as well." Her tone contained no plea for him to mend the freezer. "Besides," she added, "I like a change now and again - and tins give me that."

Without warning, she sat down cross-legged in the middle of the floor. He was grateful to rest his aching legs and knelt



"Even in death she had endowed her house with her own brand of bitterness and spite..."

by her side. She gripped his hand tightly.

Reflective, she jerked her head to one side, flicking wisps of hair from her eyes. No tide-marks, hair glistening and healthy, she seemed clean and content, but for the eyes... "It's a fascinating room, when empty, isn't it?" Her eyes roamed over the ramshackle place. "Not much furniture left to cook with," he mused. "I've lived here for three years now - not only in this room..." She gestured nervously. "I mean the whole hunk of house. 'Hunk of house' - do you like that?"

"Yes, I do." Her eyes shone at him, and he saw tears behind them, streams of emotion that never trickled forth. She seemed so defenceless, so fragile. And, he feared, desirable.

"My name's Mystique Recondite."

Where did reality begin and end with her? Still, the name suited here! "What did you mean, your Knight Errant?"

"I want to get away from this," she

suddenly confessed in a whisper and her eyes rolled as though aware of an indiscretion; "This thing, this house..." The change in tone - an allegiance - was disconcertingly abrupt, almost to the point of schizophrenia. Then it dawned on him that she had not been outside the house in those three years! No wonder she was so wan, so erratic, seeming less than sane.

Intrigued and a little scared, he felt his skin creep icily down his spine. Her grip tightened, nails digging into his palm. Clearly, underneath her cheerful, uncaring manner she, too, was afraid of something.

"Mystique. Do you know the woman I'm seeking?" He was now anxious to set away, yet, perversely, he did not want to leave her alone here. "Miss Abigail Winkworth - is she related to your Aunty, perhaps?"

A crumb fell from the ceiling. "Yes. But before I say any more you must promise you will never leave me, bring me back here."

Under normal circumstances he would have laughed, dismissed her demand as a demented plea, to be patronised only until the men in white coats arrived with a straightjacket. But he'd known her so long now, or felt he had, he could not deny or betray her. He nodded.

"Promise!"

The ceiling shook with her words. Crumbled and flaked.

"I promise you'll never be left here."

She leaned forward, pouting. "You have twisted the words." Her lip curled back. "It's like milking a reluctant cow to get you to say it."

"All right, 'Mystique. I promise I shall never leave you, bring you back," And he meant it.

Mystique sighed contentedly. "What's your name, Knight Errant?"

"Alann - with a double an." He smiled and sensed a change in the air, like a pressure increase heralding a storm. Now the vile staleness of the discarded cans, of the age of the place, permeated his nostrils and throat and sickened him. As though some odour-shield had been withdrawn.

He heard the unmistakable creaking of floorboards, upstairs.

"I like you, Alann," he heard her say. "I like you a lot." Her vermillion lips curved. Engaging, yet incongruous at this time; tongue flicked, licking her lips. Against his will, a lascivious stirring below his stomach began to warm his blood.

Hinges squeaked and her smile froze. He followed her alarmed gaze. In some mysterious manner the cellar door's bolt had loosened; the door swung slightly ajar. Foetid air floated out, a miasma that crossed the room and pressed against him. The ceiling uttered a moan. Pieces of whitewash and cement dropped in little clusters, making a series of scratching sounds.

"Aunty must be angry," he said and instantly regretted it.

Mystique cried out, "No, Aunty! Not him! Please! Not this one!" She jumped up, made to let go his hand. "I won't let you!" But he hung on, he didn't intend losing her.

Now the ceiling issued a monstrous belch. The green walls dulled, wan and indistinct. His nostrils snatched some nauseous odour, reminiscent of a slaughter house. Plaster cascaded onto the rubbish already there.

Mystique hesitated, despair clouding her eyes. He clutched her hand tighter, fingers interlaced.

The roof quivered, emitting a fountain of dust. And the cellar door swung wide: a spectral light shone from within. Tempted to seek shelter, he ran across the room with her, came up against the wall. But he held back, lest they become buried alive.

Swan pressed her against the wall, close to his inadequate sheltering body. Hunks of house dropped in dribs and drabs, bounced on rubble; clouds of choking dust leapt up only to subside and leap again. A rogue alabaster splinter pipped his shoulder. All he could hear was the trumble of falling debris. It grew into a deafening, continuous, horrible roar.

As his watering eyes focused on the beckoning cellar entrance to his left, he could see the spectral glow emanated from what appeared to be bones... His head spun giddily as Mystique's words forcefully returned: "Not this one! I won't let you!"

The cellar was a trap.

Something hard and jagged rapped shoulder blades. He experienced a cold trickle of blood as he felt the stabbing pain of Aunty Berenice's displeasure. Mystique stood imobile, eyes clamped shut. Dust stuck to the sweat on their faces, to his injured back.

His once reassuring revolver pressed against his rib cage: he released a barking laugh on dust-flecked lips. What good was a gun against anything like Aunt berenice? On the edge of hysteria, he laughed again.

One moment the thunder bellowed, the air screamed; the next, an unreal, deathly silence enveloped them. Only the centre of the ceiling had fallen.

Unexpectedly, Mystique lifted her dusty lips to his. Her gesture was more thankful than coquettish. "Thank you, my Knight Errant, my Alann with a double en," she said. "When you laughed, she was beaten. There's been no laughter in this house for years." For compassion, concern, love... Her eyes glistened. "You see, you were my

Knight Errant."

He had no logical answer to that. But he believed instinctively that Aunty Berenice had been the beneficiary he sought. His client had referred to her as a sour, disillusioned old woman who thrived on hate and fear. She had destroyed her family and her children's lives, then vanished. Yes, she would have probably changed her name. But she could not change her nature: even in death she had endowed her house with her own brand of bitterness and spite. Even to the point of manipulating Mystique. Yet he was no longer interested in client or job.

Holding her hand, he recalled his promise. His heart pounded, and not because of their ordeal: he now had no wish to break his promise, ever.

Without so much as a backward glance they left the firemen and the police and the curious onlookers to sort out the shambles, to bar up the entrance, to close the house of Aunty Berenice until it could be razed to the ground, removed forever from the world of Mystique Recondite.

## The Conservatory Chair

### Jon Bye

All season, holding the lawn's address,  
this scuffed and soiled woven thing  
had fired contented cracklings  
across warm evening conversation.

Now as he tugged to clear away  
its deadlegs had rooted firm.  
Long since, needled, boiled willow-wands  
revived by talk and wine.

It happened. He remembered camellias  
rarely cossetted. One frost's shrivelling  
had shifted life into their stakes.  
Pollarded shanes add confirmation.

Impressed, at dusk he later sat  
with feet encased in osiers,  
content beneath a bleeding moon  
arms bound roughly with the chair's.

And there they found him—  
the wickered man, with heartwood  
green beneath sheer skin. Pleached  
new to his chosen pattern.

# Beyond The Threshold

## (Part One)

### Brian J. Frost

DOORS PLAY an important part in our lives, yet for most of the time we take them for granted, little suspecting their hidden potential for introducing into the dull routine of the daily round moments of wonder or terror.

When one stops to think about it, the intriguing thing about doors - even the ordinary man-made structures we pass through every day - is that they have not one but three main functions, inasmuch as they afford either ingress or egress when serving as entrances and exits, and when locked or barred act as barriers, preventing passage either way. To complicate matters further, doors come in all shapes and sizes, and are made out of divers materials. Some doors, for instance, are solid and substantial, others illusory, while not a few are disguised as other things. And, whether they be large or small, real or imaginary, welcoming or forbidding, none are exactly the same.

According to Freud, the door is one of the commonest symbols used by man; it is, he declares, a symbol of the mysteries and revelations of life, of faith, hope and perception. Symbolically, life itself may be viewed as a perspective of portals stretching before us, through which we pass on our journey through life, until at last we come to the ultimate door marked 'death'. On our way we find that some doors open to pleasant, inviting vistas; others to terrifying prospects. The only thing we can be certain of is that we never pass twice through the same door, or return to a door through which we did not pass.

In spiritualist circles they use the term 'psychic door'. At seances, for instance, the 'medium' acts as a human doorway, enabling the living to communicate with the dead and viceversa. But for even closer contact with the dead - and the undead - it is necessary to journey out of the body. This is accomplished through auto-hypnosis by means of a symbol, which opens a door to the astral plane. However, there is great danger attached to the practice

of astral projection, especially for the inexperienced dabbler in the occult, as, by accident, he might find himself in the dreadso sphere of Luna and become en rapport with the Obscene Ones, thus exposing himself to demonic possession. For, as Dion Fortune cautions us, "the chaotic forces of the Abyss can so easily find ingress to a 'sensitive's' mind through the ill-fitting doors of the neurotic temperament."

Then again, some people believe that doors in the mind can be opened by drugs, which they regard as elixirs to unseal the gates of the inner mind; but those who have tried them have often found that the door they have opened leads straight to Hell. A much safer way to stimulate the mind is by somnolent cerebration. Simply by passing through the gate of deep slumber we can all be roamers of vast spaces and travellers in many ages; we can drift to worlds beyond the stars and explore an infinity of dimensions. Indeed, the imagination is a master-key that unlocks many doors.

In occult lore - especially the doctrines of magical cults - one finds constant allusions to doors, gateways and similar means of access, either to worlds beyond time and space or to different dimensions of consciousness. The method of unsealing these hidden doors varies, but principally it depends upon intense concentration on certain symbols in conjunction with the intonation of magical incantations.

Sex also plays a major part in opening magical doors. The erotic techniques of sexual sorcery practised by Adepts of the Left-hand Path, for instance, involve the utilization of psycho-sexual energies in awakening and controlling the dormant forces of the subconscious mind. During the ritual, the magician unites - magically as well as sexually - with a priestess of the Order, who serves as the 'door of power'.

In a similar but far more dangerous form of this ritual, secret formulae are used as a means of unsealing the gateway

of the Abyss, facilitating the influx of non-human forces, which are, according to occultists, ever waiting for an opportunity to gain access to the human life-wave. Conversely, by a reversal of the technique, the magician can project his consciousness through the Gate, passing into the secret counterpart of our universe - a totally alien realm of anti-matter which exists outside space and time. Called Universe 'B' to distinguish it from the phenomenal world, it is said to be populated by evil forces beyond our powers of comprehension and resistance.

Aleister Crowley, the most notorious "black" magician of modern times, was alleged to have established contact with transmundane entities called the 'Deep Ones' by the performance of a ritual he personally perfected. Known as the formula of the Scarlet Woman, it involved sexual congress with a carefully selected female member of his Order, who took on the role of a symbolic gateway to the Void. Ultimately, Crowley's aim was to establish a gate in space through which the forces from Outside could enter and become manifest on earth.

If all this sounds like something out of a story by H. P. Lovecraft, it should be understood that the leaders of certain Black Magic cults flourishing today believe that Lovecraft was, consciously or unconsciously, reflecting the basic themes of Crowley's Cult of Shaitan-Aiwass in his now-famous fictionalisation of cosmic myth cycles.

As is well known to devotees of Lovecraft's fiction, the prime postulate of the Cthulhu Myths stories is that there exist gates to and from other dimensions through which powerful non-human forces, inimical to mankind, are attempting to gain a footing on Earth. Behind this recurrent theme lies the supposition that our planet had once been ruled by chaotic entities who crossed the Abyss from other universes incalculable eons ago; and that termination of their reign occurred when they were expelled by superior forces allied to the cause of Order and the laws of the Cosmos. Subsequently, the defeated gods were dispersed to different parts of the Void, from where they ceaselessly plot to regain their former power, using as tools a gallery of mad experimenters and 'sensitives' living in the world today who are insane or misguided enough to unseal the gates that bar their re-entry. For, as it is written in the

NECRONOMICON: "They wait ever at the Gate and the Gate is all places at all times; and those who know of the Gates shall be impelled to open the way for Them and shall serve Them as they desire."

Kenneth Grant, in several of his controversial books on magic (THE MAGICAL REVIVAL, NIGHTSIDE OF EDEN, OUTSIDE THE CIRCLES OF TIME etc) has pointed to the remarkable parallels between the barbarous gods of Lovecraft's pantheon and those associated with Crowley's cult, claiming that Lovecraft's Great Old Ones equate with Crowley's The Great Ones of the Night of Time. Indeed, although Lovecraft always denied any knowledge of Crowley's magical practises, it does seem an amazing coincidence that Lovecraft chose to people his stories with characters who, like Crowley, are bent on calling through the gateways of Space powerful entities of non-human origin, with the express intention of assisting them in their plans to re-establish sovereignty over Earth.

Door symbolism in the Cthulhu Myths is perhaps most evident in its major grimoire, the fabulous NECRONOMICON, which is specifically concerned with methods of opening the secret gateways leading outside the ordered universe. And it is true to say that it is the sort of world that lies on the other side of the Gates and the nature of its denizens which provides much of the fascination of this unique body of fiction.

The monstrous pre-human forces imprisoned behind the Gates are, like the realm they inhabit, totally beyond all human concepts of law and structure. Essentially vampiric, they absorb any human being who comes within their sphere of sensation, devouring even those who foolishly champion their cause.

Like all symbols of primal evil, Lovecraft's anarchic gods are negative and disruptive, the antithesis of positive existence; and in my view they are not merely 'alien', as some commentators suggest, but evil in the full sense of the word. Interestingly, from an occult standpoint, Evil (with a capital 'E') equates with chaos; it is, if we accept the interpretation of occultists, a timeless force antedating the human race, the planets, even the cosmos. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that contemporary Black Magic and Voodoo cults share the point of view expressed in the tales of the Cthulhu Myths

that the source from which these elemental forces of evil emanate is the dimensionless gulfs of space between the stars, otherwise known as the Abyss.

This is not a new idea by any means, for if one delves into the oldest myths and occult traditions known to mankind, one discovers that the earliest terrors which beset primitive man stemmed from his fear of an invasion by the dark forces of the Abyss, either chthonian or extra-terrestrial. And it has been speculated that this obsession lay at the root of all rituals and exorcisms ever evolved.

Recently it has been theorized that the Egyptian pyramids were originally designed as gigantic lids over wells of water (symbolic of the 'ocean of space') to keep out the denizens of the Deep; and if we also take into account the fact that in primitive Australian rituals magical spells chanted over a pit or magic circle were against demons dwelling in the underworld, it may be adduced that the magicians' magic circle is a relic of protective barriers used to ward off or imprison demonic forces from the Abyss.

Today, if we are to give credence to the utterances of Kenneth Grant, we are in greater danger than ever before from disruptive forces from Outside. Nuclear test explosions, he claims, have blasted a hole in space through which evil emanations from the Abyss are pouring into Earth's astral atmosphere, hence the dramatic increase in lawlessness and breakdown of moral codes over the past few decades. Both, he declares, are symptoms of an unprecedented influx of negative vibrations which, if unchecked, could eventually overwhelm human consciousness, leading to a worldwide descent into barbarism and anarchy.

Grant, it should be noted, firmly believes in the occult verity of the Cthulhu Mythos - except he prefers to call it the Necronomicon Mythos - and he has been supported in this view by spokesmen for contemporary Voodoo cults, who are of the opinion that Lovecraft was secretly an Adept of the Left-Hand Path. His stories, they claim, are actual occult experiences disguised as fiction!

While not entirely dismissing this controversial theory, Grant thinks it more likely that Lovecraft was a "black" magician in a previous existence, and that the disturbing nightmares which plagued

him throughout his adult life were a result of misdeeds committed in a previous incarnation.

Although there is little written evidence among Lovecraft's voluminous correspondence to support either theory, there is a significant passage in *THE CASE OF CHARLES DEXTER WARD* which indicates that Lovecraft knew more about the Black Arts than he was prepared to divulge. Referring to Eliehas Levi, the famous Victorian magician, he described him as "that cryptic soul who crept through a crack in the forbidden door and glimpsed the frightful vistas of the void beyond."

Grant surmises that Lovecraft had also contemplated crossing the Abyss, but had stepped back from the brink when faced with the prospect of the loss of personal identity this entails. For in order to make a successful crossing the Adept must liberate his consciousness from the confines of individual existence and become one with the elemental forces with whom he wishes to identify, gaining through the sacrifice a massive expansion of consciousness.

A literal interpretation of the Abyss and Universe 'B' is not the only one acknowledged by contemporary occultists, some of whom regard them as aspects of the subconscious mind. The reductionist view is that Universe 'B' equates with the mental or subjective universe, otherwise known as inner space.

To explore the inmost recesses of this subliminal world, and to make contact with the deepest forces of the unconscious, it is necessary for the magician to undergo a form of regression to a primal state of consciousness, which is achieved by a complex technique of mind-control and sexual sorcery. Crossing the threshold of the door leading into the subcellar beneath consciousness, the magician embarks on a journey into the Unconscious - and therein lies great danger. For just as the dark abysses of outer space are allegedly denominated by terrible, pre-human entities, so are the labyrinthine tunnels of inner space said to be haunted by the 'Shadows of Darkness', contact with which is exceedingly dangerous - invariably leading to madness. Deeper still, in the dark miasma sea of the Unconscious, the Adept will encounter the Shadow. Instinctual, amoral, and predatory, this is none other than the bestial 'Mr. Hyde' which lurks within each of us - our alter ego. Finally, at the very bottom of this black



pit can be found the origin of the Shadow and all that is foul and evil. But, should an Adept ever reach this point, death (i.e. annihilation of the ego) would immediately follow.

It is perhaps significant, in the light of what has already been revealed, that Lovecraft's stories either deal with terrors originating from inner space or, alternatively, from outer space. 'The Rats in the Walls' is a prime example of the former, while most of the Cthulhu Mythos tales fall into the latter category.

Gate symbolism, while mainly associated with Lovecraft's Mythos tales, is also prominent in three Randolph Carter stories, 'The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath', 'The Silver Key' and 'Through the Gates of the Silver Key'. In 'Dream Quest', Carter's spirit goes through the Gate of Deep Slumber into a fantastic Dunsanian dreamworld; in 'The Silver Key' he returns to the happy world of his childhood by obtaining a key to the past; and in the mind-boggling semi-autobiographical 'Through the Gates of the Silver Key' Carter unlocks a gate leading from Earth and time to that extension of the universe which is outside time, from which

in turn the Ultimate Gate leads to the Last Void outside all earths, all universes, and all matter.

In the stories of Lovecraft's numerous disciples, one still finds this same pre-occupation with inter-dimensional gateways. August Derleth, in particular, made regular use of this device in his short stories. Typical examples are 'The Gable Window', about a window-lens which is really a disguised gateway to the dimension of the Old Ones; 'Beyond the Threshold', in which a lonely rural house serves as a gateway for the god Ithaqua; and 'The Return of Hastur', which ends with the central character making the awful discovery that his own mind and body form a gateway for one of the exiled gods.

Derleth, in his recension of the Cthulhu Mythos, incorporated the legend that after dispersing the Old Ones to distant gulfs of space the benign Elder Gods set their seals upon the Gates; and he has graphically recounted the dire consequences of these being broken in the interconnected stories featuring Dr. Laban Shrewsbury, whose life is dedicated to the task of

seeking out and blocking up the Gates wherever he finds them.

Britain's two major contributors to the Cthulhu Mythos, Ramsey Campbell and Brian Lumley, have also effectively utilised the door or gate motif in their stories. Campbell has written about a door to the planet Yuggoth in 'The Mine on Yuggoth' and a portal to another dimension in 'The Church in the High Street'; while Lumley featured a mirror-gate in 'The Mirror of Nitocris', and in another of his stories, 'De Marigny's Clock', had a timepiece shaped like a coffin function as a dimensional gateway to a nightmare world.

Normally, doors of the man-made kind hold no terror for us; but what would you do if, on opening an ordinary-looking door, you were suddenly confronted with some horrible scene straight out of a Bosch painting, or something equally unexpected and alarming? Well, it is no great feat of clairvoyance on my part to predict that you would slam the door shut and run for your life. I would, I can assure you!

Luckily, the likelihood of this situation arising in the real world is very remote, to say the least; but in the imaginary world of weird fiction, where the unexpected is the rule rather than the exception, this kind of experience is nothing out of the ordinary. On the contrary, it is strange occurrences like this that are the stock-in-trade of weird fiction writers; for, in their eyes, doors - even the commonplace variety - are invariably gateways to terror and illusion, and need to be treated with some caution.

Stories about phantom doors that appear and disappear unexpectedly have been a staple of supernatural fiction for a long time. Two that have achieved classic status since their first publication many years ago are M. R. James' 'Number 13' and Fitz James O'Brien's 'The Lost Room'.

In the latter the reclusive occupant of an apartment in a mysterious lodging house finds his quiet life abruptly shattered when he returns from a midnight stroll to discover, on opening the door, that his room is subtly altered in appearance and, even more disturbing, is in the possession of a sextet of sinister men and women. Despite his pleas they refuse to leave, and force him to throw dice for the tenancy of the room. But he loses, and is forcibly ejected into the corridor. And when, in

desperation, he wheels round to remonstrate with his persecutors, finds that the door to his apartment has vanished; and search though he may he never finds it again.

Dorothy Quick's 'The Lost Door' and Rachel Cosgrove Paves' 'The Door' are two lesser tales about phantom doors. In both, not only do the doors appear and disappear mysteriously, but the people who walk through them vanish into thin air, never to be seen again.

One of the most original 'door' stories of recent years is 'The Crack in the Wall' by Walter Jarvis. A man discovers a crack in the wall of his cellar, and his curiosity is aroused when it begins to grow wider and emits a strange radiance. Looking through the fissure he sees a beautiful pastoral landscape. It looks very inviting; and not unnaturally the man - a typical henpecked husband - is tempted to climb through the door-like opening and escape from his drab existence into the paradise beyond; but, as he stands teetering on the brink, his dog leaps through ahead of him, and immediately the crack snaps shut. Shaken by this sudden turn of events, it quickly dawns on the man that it is an anthropophagic wall, and the beautiful view seen through the crack is just a lure to ensnare its prey!

H. S. W. Chibbett's short story 'They That Wait' features an equally bizarre kind of door. A dabbler in the occult discovers a doorway to a hidden world in another dimension bordering our own, which is inhabited by a race of grotesque frog-like beings. He first becomes aware of this camouflaged world when he sees a 'living' picture of it on the wall of his bedroom - an optical illusion caused by the peculiar pattern on the wallpaper, via which he is eventually sucked into this realm of horror.

Passage through strange doorways is not, however, always one-way traffic. In Edmond Hamilton's 'The Door into Infinity', for instance, inhabitants from another dimension create a door into our world, with the intention of preying upon the human race. In their evil designs they are aided by a fanatical sect of worshippers called The Brotherhood of the Door, whose prime function is to provide human sacrifices for their masters - 'They Beyond the Door'. Typical 1930s pulp fare from the pages of 'Weird Tales', it is the kind of story that makes great demands on the reader's ability to suspend disbelief.

A more convincing narrative about an alien incursion into our world is Francis Flagg's 'The Distortion out of Space', which succeeds, where stories like the aforementioned seem far-fetched and implausible, by virtue of its natural setting and the fact that the door in question is a prosaic door to an ordinary bedroom. But the events that take place within those four walls are far from ordinary.

It all begins when a meteor crashes through the roof of a farmhouse and comes to rest in the upper storey. When two young men investigate at the behest of the shocked occupier, they discover an amazing sight. For on opening the bedroom door they behold the emptiness of illimitable space stretching away on all sides beyond the door, like a gloomy, grey, intimidating nothingness. Upon hearing that the man's wife is lost somewhere in the room, one of the young men goes in to rescue her, and in turn becomes lost. He is seen by his companion going down what seems an everlasting vista of grey distance, until his figure dwindles and vanishes. On entering the room in an attempt to find him, the other young man is similarly confronted with the impossible phenomenon of infinite space, in which matter is warped and light curved, causing him to fear that he is trapped forever in this strange limbo - until, by a fluke, he stumbles on the source of the distortion, a shining radiation giving off diffusing waves of energy. Seizing his chance, he shoots at the centre of the glowing mass and mortally wounds the alien intelligence causing the phenomenon around them - a spider-like creature from another solar system - on whose death the room is restored to its former state.

Lastly, I want to outline a story which is a personal favorite, 'The Door in the Wall', by H. G. Wells. It concerns a man's lifelong obsession with a green door in a white brick wall, which he first encounters at the tender age of five, having wandered off on his own. Immediately, he is attracted to the door and feels a strong urge to open it and walk in, even though he senses it could bring him much sorrow. In the end his natural childish curiosity gets the better of him and, rushing eagerly through the door, he finds himself in an enchanted garden that stretches as far as the eye can see. There, in this dream paradise full of beautiful things, he makes friends with two tame panthers and meets a charming young girl who introduces him to playmates of his own age. For a while he is blissfully

happy, until a sombre, dark lady carrying a book takes him aside and shows him 'living' pictures of what has happened to him from the day he was born up to the time he entered the garden. She is, however, reluctant to show him anything beyond this point. But he pesters her until she does, and immediately she turns the page he finds, to his dismay, that he is no longer in his new-found paradise, but back in the street, standing outside the green door. Understandably, he is heartbroken, and even when safely restored to the bosom of his family is still inconsolable; for when he tries to tell his parents about his wonderful adventure, they only scold him. Afterwards, for nights on end, he cries himself to sleep, still yearning for the enchanted garden and his lost playmates.

A few years later, just as the memory of the wonderful experience is beginning to fade, he has his second encounter with the door in the wall. Again he experiences a strong desire to open it, but is late for school and foregoes the opportunity in order to preserve his record for punctuality, thinking to return to the spot the next day when there is a school holiday. However, the chance has gone, for when he tries to retrace his steps he is unable to find the elusive door.

At other stages in his life there are similar opportunities for him to cross the threshold of the door in the wall, but always there is some obstacle to prevent him from fulfilling his desire. Meanwhile, his career flourishes, and he becomes a high-ranking politician; but still, in his heart, he grieves for the magic garden of his childhood.

His final encounter with the door ends in tragedy. He thinks he sees it again one night on his way home from a late sitting at the House of Commons; but only ends up in a trap. The next day his body is found in a deep excavation, which is protected from the intrusion of the public by a white hoarding in which a small green door has been cut to allow workmen to enter. And so, in the end, one is left wondering if he had been mistaken about the door in the dark, or was he all along the victim of a fantastic dream. Another possibility - one that Wells probably wanted us to consider foremost - was that in death the man had at last found the paradise of his dreams, and had entered "a door that goes into peace, into delight, into beauty beyond dreams."

# The God Of Clay

## Joel Lane

THE DAWNING SKY was a hearth in which the diffuse flames of the sun's aura spread, crimson-heated and azure-tipped, above the muddled coals of the earth. It shimmered and shifted wilfully, emitting clusters of whirling sparks like premature stars to trace illevisible symbols across the already bleared scrolls of cloud. The smoke of the sun was darkening the world.

Squinting through the window from where he lay sunbeneath a low pallet bed, the boy watched the lone red-fanned cloud that swayed at a treetop in the distance. He could see the tree's branches flinch quivering from the foul breath of the assailant. Great silver-green globes of fruit sprouted at the tips of its twigs; they swelled, burst and dissolved the cloud in a rain of acid teardrops which, in falling, became shrivelled leaves of russet and gold.

The boy closed his eyes. Instantly the darkness was lit up by the moon-faces, scarred with black, whose distorted features danced in time to an inaudible laugh. He heard the whirring of a moth's wings; suddenly it settled upon his chest. It was so large that its ticking wingtips spanned his nipples. Through his shut eyelids he could discern its clarine twin yellow eyes.

The boy, aged thirteen years, bore an older face. Like flickering embers embedded in dead coals, his bloodshot eyes burned within blackened circles. His lips were cracked and bleeding. The waxy whiteness of his features made his straggling fair hair appear discoloured and dirty.

He prayed. The fever had reduced his voice to a breathless whisper, but the words sounded clearly in his head. Nevertheless, he could not have repeated them, had he ever tried. Somewhere in the tornado of his deranged soul, beyond nausea or agony, behind the reality that had become an illusion, he sought out the blank void and spoke to its tenebrous inhabitant. He prayed to the spirit of transformation, whose clay creatures form and harden and melt again in the form of eternity. Adjuring the god whose mysteries are the births and deaths of universes, and whose sacra-

ments are the twinklings of a fluid gem in a human eye, he offered his self as the only possible sacrifice. He begged for disunion, for surcease of being. Returning then through voices of dis eased sensation and ideation to consciousness, he struggled to free his mind from the trammels of misery that bound his body. But, at first, the only images that could come to him were huge mechanical wheels of whitish light. Their centripetal sucking drew him toward a featureless hub from which emanated a smell or taste which was obscurely sickening, akin to the texture of an open wound. It was the smell of pain.

Slowly the poisonous pit of the hub filled from within with a melancholy sound of singing. A face took shape; it was a woman's, smooth-outlined, smiling and ame less. She sang a lilting melody that flowed from the pulse of the heart hidden beneath her ripling breast; the song was as gentle as the hand reaching out to stroke the boy's tangled hair, yet as dark and bitter as the eyes that worked their hypnotic spell upon his own swollen and inflamed eyelids. Soon his eyes closed again, and their inner shades were drawn against the phantasms of delirium.

The giant moth rose silently from the boy's chest. It swooped around the chamber, brushing the low ceilings, and had reached the window when it realised that it was not a moth. Then it gained a purchase upon the open shutters with its two hands, and took one last glimpse at the grotesquely slumped figure on the bed before thrusting its pale visage, framed in a blonde halo, out into the twilight, and slipping lightly down to the ground outside to stand in the shadow of the wall.

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The light of day was gone, save in the wanomic glow of a full moon so turbidly red that it might have been mistaken for the setting sun. Stars attended the bloated globe, like minute naked larvae scattered about a sluggish queen ant. 'o brighter than the moonlight, but warm where the firmament was cold, the dwindling wood-fire

hissed and creaked in a corner of the bare chamber. A girl crouched before the grate. Her attention was fixed upon the fluid patterns of flame that danced before the backdrop of the charred chimney wall, but her hands twisted a soft object, held below her breasts like a mute infant.

She was some fifteen years of age, dark of skin and hair, with great dreamy-black eyes and a red mouth that whispered wordless messages to the night. The thing that her slim hands kneaded was an elongated effigy of damp grey clay, mottled and streaked with brown mud.

The girl lifted the doll up to her face, rubbing and pinching it to increase its resemblance to a human shape. Now the unskillfully grey figure bore an upright posture, its spine stiffened by the pressure of her fingers; but still it lacked a face or sex. Slowly, as though unconscious of the actions, she wound a lone tress of her hair about a finger, and severed the lock with a small wood-handled knife. The cutting made a rough, tearing sound, echoed in the breath that the girl drew in sharply between her teeth. She rewound the fresh tress around the neck and torso of the doll, like a primitive garment, and pressed its ends into the doll's misshapen shoulders. Then she tilted forward on her feet - her cramped limbs making her unsteady - and drooped the effigy into the cold and silver jewel-hoard of the grate. It fell prone, and flames licked about the head in a wreath of glory.

The robe of hair took fire first, and enveloped the grey form in writhing coils of intense heat. The naked doll shrank from the torture; the clay exuded droplets of sweat that sizzled away as rapidly as they formed. White weals and gaping, glistening sores opened in its flesh. Then, before it could find in dissolution a relief from the torments of existence, the shuddering body cohered in a darker and denser shape. The fickle flames, finding its moisture impenetrable, abandoned the doll to its gradual, self-buried death amid the ashes.

Watching this miniature deathbed-mine as the inflamed moon crossed its empty sky and returned to oblivion, the girl began to chant a ritual verse. Her voice, a persistent whisper adumbrated by intermittent low and resonant vocalisations, passed over the feverish earthen child in its bed of heat like an unheard lullaby. She invoked the inconceivable powers of the god whose

priests are will-o'-wishes in hazardous, infected swamps, whose acolytes are livid fireflies that trace arcane runes in their frenzied dances of courtship over marbled travestones on moonless nights. She sang of these, and of other things: of the shimmering corpse-light of verdurous phosphorescence on the listening walls of yawning subterranean caverns; of buried gems that shone with the splendour of stars, planets and meteors, turquoise and sapphire and amber, like crystalline shards of a shattered rainbow fallen from the sky; of silver pearls showered like hailstones through the nethermost abysses of the ocean; and of the cold kiss of a giant of stone on the lips of a nymph of the fountain. When she was finished, she turned blindly from the fire, ignoring its sullen troll dweller, and stretched her limbs out on the floor; without moving to her bed, or even stirring further from the hearth, but only turning her dusky face a little toward the window, she slept.

The embers of the fire were still smouldering a dull coppery red, which cast no shadows, as the first rattling and shaking came at the open window-shutters. A hand scratched across the outer wall; a foot slipped and then held on the shallowly jutting ledge. The stars disappeared, then rekindled as the floor trembled subtly to an impact of feline lightness.

At once, the girl sat up and opened her eyes upon the visitor. With a visionary prescience which exceeded the acute perceptions of night-adjusted senses, she beheld every detail of that which stood below her window. He was slender and graceful, his great head, bearing noble and youthful features, wrapped in a hood of opaque black hair. Handsome though he was, the figure could not be thought human, but rather a finely carved ebony statue with a mask of bronze. His eyes were holes in that mask, holes opening upon a deep, inviolate sarcophagus.

The visitant held out one shadow-gloved hand to lift the girl from the floor. She took it; his grip was strong as wire, hard bones moving beneath the silken skin like the spine of a cat. Their eyes met, their faces only inches apart, and the girl involuntarily averted her face, subconsciously aware that she could not hear the man's breath nor feel his warmth. A terrifyingly beautiful smile glowed momentarily upon his face. "Come away with me," his voice said darkly within her head, as

his hand pulled her free of the ground. The two hovered for a few long heartbeats on the verge of the night; then they passed through the open threshold onto the road that the night-wind wove between the treelines and the stars.

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Like a disoriented bat trapped in a narrow cave and innocent to find the opening, the white, thin-limbed ghost darted and dipped from wall to wall in the confining chamber, trailing a shif of faintly luminous ectoplasmal mist. In the course of a spiralling swoon it landed obliquely upon the exposed chest of the boy sleeping outstretched on the low bed. Without a further movement, it was gone. A passing breeze sucked the last trailing wisps of ghost-cloud away to join the distant, gigantic tumuli arrayed against the iron-blue horizon, where the somnolent sun was coening its dream-bleary and night-lidded eye.

The youth stirred uncomfortably, profoundly reluctant to admit his wakefulness to the hateful sentinels in his heart, throat and forehead. He drew the frayed, faded shreds of his dream closer about his shivering soul. This morning was a new death, like any other, mourned only by the ghosts of past and future. As all martyrs, he had gained a small victory over the shoul of anguish by loosing the chains of consciousness; he had made his oain universal, indistinguishable from the birth-pangs of the first mother or the death-agony of the last child. There was no moment to cut itself upon the sated stones of reality: only the eternal thundering waterfall vomited from an inverted abyss; the annihilation of form where molten flesh and metallic bile churned and seethed; the insensible orgasm of an imploding cosmos.

The nights saw his rebirth, pure and peaceful, into a land of transcendent joy. Then he was free and fair, moving without effort, without weight, his every motion part of an unbroken dance in which the stars and the miraculous beings of the transubstantiate world were participant. He wandered without aim or volition in the pathless gardens of the god of clay; tree's bone and river's muscle, cliff and cavern, hill and hollow were imbued with sentience and subtle life. Hovering like a swallow, swooping like a hawk, the boy played where the grass rippled to no earthly breeze. The wary nocturnal animals fled at his

approach, hiding to watch in their nests and burrows; his playmates were those strange children snatched of the mating between earth and moon: sullen, lethargic trolls and agile, hideous-faced goblins. When the silence of these misbegotten companions began to frighten him, the faithful zemhvrz bore him up into abstract tapestries of swirling vapour, where immense presences lurked massively before the moon, and swept him down again to some granite-crowned hilltop or to some thyme-scented meadow sprinkled with diamonds of dew. While far away, an aged gypsy woman, with wisdom and tenderness in her deeply etched countenance, sang an ancient magical song, and her wrinkled hand smoothed the callid, perspiring brow of a restlessly sleeping child. He felt that he knew that marvellous song by heart; yet never, in sleeping or in waking, did the boy come to receive it.

And at last, this breathless, nectar-veined self would return in the ominous aurora of the twilight to its place of birth; as the intangible texture and scent of enchantment sliced from his grass, and the dawn-stained earth became once more solid and stagnant, its stark outlines standing guard over the arcana of the underworld, the voyager climbed clumsily over the dense transparent landscape of the lower air, and forced himself with pain into a sepulchral cavity where the sunrise burnished harshly through the curtain of sleep, and a dying husk writhed in its vit of sweat and gall.

The barred door of wakefulness hung on its stiff hinges for a moment, before slamming home upon the cage of the imprisoned soul. In that moment, the boy thought that he could remember the melody and the secret words of the wise old woman's song, echoing in some inner chamber of awareness. Perhaps it was so; but what he heard was only the dawn chorus of the birds, commencing outside his window like the first light chimes of a church bell.

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And these realms are known to all of us; but we cannot fully remember our sojourns in a world unlit by the lamps of reason. While we pursue our limited livelihoods, impoverished by matter and mind and their primitive laws, our other selves follow their own unique existences. They drink from the deep wells of universal power, and pluck the fermented fruit from the seven branches of the sacred tree.



"His playmates... sullen, lethargic trolls and agile hoblings."

These daedal dominions where the astral souls have their being are perhaps close to the faery country envisioned in our childhood. There no vertigo of self-awareness or confusion of guilt can cloud the mathematical purity of the supernatural law. There the enigmatic sprite Peter Pan leads his vulnerable virgin sweetheart high above the skies; first star on the right, and straight on till morning. To the never-land, the nether land. Tentatively, Alice enters the mysteries of an inverted reality. Orbs and mirrors reveal the truth that is occluded from direct sight. And perhaps the faerian angel that hovers at the voyager's shoulder is only another part of his self, a spirit that knows more than does the questing ego.

Every creation is evidence of the mind of its creator. Sometimes it is the only evidence. Though they belong to children, the far fields of faery are not of child's making. Their strangely soulless dwellers bear an innocence older and more evil than knowledge. This is the crucible of alchemical transmutation. Here Marcissus watches eternally over his amaranthine image; Icarus writhes shrieking in free-fall from the jealous embrace of the sun, murdered in the instant of enlightenment, no longer bird in form nor boy in soul. By the mouths of prehistoric caves, on the banks of lethean rivers, beings once human slither and flail and howl at the swollen moon. And in the sulphurous depths of earth, below the deepest cravt, the salamander crawls, white, blind and naked, over the deathless carmine coals of hell. For the god of clay is also the god of fire.

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The wind of their precipitous flight whispered in the maidens' ear as her dark companion drew her soundlessly on through the air. The world was clearly visible, up to and beyond the horizon; for space itself shone, revealing its inner nature.

There was, however, something artificial and disturbing about the scene: sprawling mounds and rude rocks bulked grossly in the lower gloom, defying all perspective; the moon was a circle of yellow cloth fixed to the sky, unreal and unconvincing. All seemed like a child's painting. The girl felt as though she were borne onward on the smooth back of a colossal horse. The animal's flank pulsed between her knees, and its breath plumed among the passing strands of white cloud.

An indescribable kinesis animated her limbs: a trembling in time with the beating of a tremendous heart that was not hers. Nor was it that of the cryptic guide whose pulling hand was the only sign that he was aware of her presence. Together they were like a pair of night-seeing crows, flying in search of a nest - or of an abandoned trophy of carrion.

The slopes below became steeper, the horizon before more starkly bare. The ethereal witch-light had faded. The mist-tainted air was thin, necessitating deep, painful gasps, and bore a perceptible chill. The wind was no longer due alone to the speed of their flight. With confusing suddenness, entire peaks and valleys vanished, enveloped by the tenebrous cloud-shadows that can only be discerned at a distance, and reappeared as suddenly in bewildering new directions.

Then the crows themselves entered the wavering darkness. There was a sense of vertiginous descent, of being held in a vortex of gravity; and then they landed softly on a mat of damp grass. At once, before the dazed follower could regain her bearings, the impersonal leader dragged her onward over the rough ground and into deeper shade. A foot splashed in a bottomless pit of mud; she pulled it out with a dull sucking slap, taking several terrified short steps on a treacherously slimy surface. She could hear her own voice in an uneven whine of fear above her panting breath; her trance-trapped heart screamed in her breast, and her spine was an icy whiplash.

Gradual illumination, pervading the valley from the sickly moon overhead, revealed a mysterious, almost spectral landscape. Green-tinted pools and stagnant streams glimmered among fantastically hued undulant carpets of heather that were fringed with waving weeds. They seemed to be in a deep subterranean cavern; the stars were fragments of crystal embedded in the vaulted roof, the trees fluted columns whose twisting branches terminated in traceries of clammy rock. The girl longed to confront these topographical grotesques, to make them resolve themselves into parts of nature; but she dared not pursue the maddening elisions that the moonlight flung at her in passing, unable as she was to lift her eyes from the ground ahead. She was afraid that her guide's - her abductor's - increasingly urgent tugging would make her stumble, and that she would fall

and be abandoned in this unnatural wilderness of wonders.

"Now they were two fleet-footed wolves, the greater leading his mate to find that for which the crows had searched. As the spirit of reason, writhing in the waves of panic that broke over her mind, lifted a despairing arm to signal the question: where? To where were they going with such maniacal haste? The racing forerunner halted without slowing. He stood immobile above the girl as she slipped and spun, nauseated and giddy, to her knees. The tooth of a stone bit into the palm of her right hand as it struck the earth underneath her; the vicious pain retarded the recovery of her balance long enough for her to slide and fall obliquely, trapping an arm between her hip and the wet ground. She sobbed once, like a hare in the talons of a hawk.

"This time he did not reach out to help her rise. He was beside her and over her, cutting off the moonlight. His obscure face, looming close to hers, was no longer a mask; it was animated by a more than human desire, and a cruelty less than human. But his pupils were still unreflecting hollows of emptiness. Again that arcane tongue spoke in her mind: "Here is a pleasant place to rest." His mouth was not occupied in speaking, as her own helpless lips could attest. It was hardly a pleasant place. Oozing mud clung to her disorded clothing, and slipped through the clutching fingers of her cut hand as though frogs were wriggling from her grasp. There were jutting stones and knots of slimy grass beneath her.

"The headlong violence of the night-creature's assault tore from her momently all sensibility of their surroundings. He was a wolf-woe, with hands and loins of stone; an incubus spawned by the earth's core, with mountainous weight in its shouldering, sulphurous flesh. Yet, worst of all, he was a clumsy, soft-skinned infant, grasping voraciously at its mother's breast. Crying incoherently and struggling without effect, she buried her hands in the mesh of his hair, and pulled; the blood ran from her wounded palm over his temple and down into her own mouth. As she choked and gagged upon that viscous gall, the violation was accomplished. There was only fire then, a fluid flame - the amber sap of the tree of life - that ravaged her excised skin, flooding her entrails, and charred every fibre of nerve to mutilated

CORDS AND COILS OF ASH.

The victim lost any sense of sequence, and fell into the illimitable absciss of utter agony. A bat struck by the owl in mid-air; an insect at the pulsing centre of a poisoned web; a star turning into a pure white supernova. On the altar of the rod of claw, in the womb of the All-rother, she underwent the first ordeal.

It was the punishment of Prometheus, howling his visceral torment from the merciless rock. Perhaps she had been guilty, too, of the Promethean crime.

Tons of null time later, the boy separated his flesh from hers, seared and soiled. Like a mountain, he slept; like a valley, she lay waiting. What she waited for, she would never know; for it never came. She stared into the blackest regions of the sky, and felt mud and blood dry and harden, uniting skin and clothing. Her being cohered. At last even the densest clouds were infiltrated by an insipid nearly brightness, and a rosseate flush, which brought no warmth, painted the plastered cheeks of the dawn.

A fallen priestess, the girl stood upright and brushed a little grime from herself. Her hair fell loosely and irregularly about her face; she could not restore its order. She rubbed some of the stiffness from her hands, and bound the stone-wound in a scrap of cloth that had been ripped from her dress. It was a sympathetic charm. The salt of dried tears stung in her eyes.

She noticed then the form sprawled in sleep, so close that she could almost have stumbled upon it. Shivering with damp and chill, and with the physical memory of horror, she leant over the motionless youth. He lay like a delicate statue broken off from its pedestal and discarded in the wasteland; his umbral features carried the terrible innocence of man. One arm hung limply at an angle across his chest. It showed no sign of stirring. No longer repelled, she touched his parted lips. They were cool; their moisture was dew; their colour was only her own dried blood, that clung too to her own lips. Intuitively redeeming the midnight's violence, she put her hand tenderly upon his unblemished breast. There was no buried murmur of life.

She lifted the light body and, bearing it in her arms, began to walk slowly

away toward the dawn. Knowledge filled and cleansed her soul, knowledge whose spiritual feeling cast out the blind emotions of ignorance. She knew where her far-away home lay. She knew from where her companion's life had come, and to where it was gone; and the unflinching care with which she carried his body was the only appropriate form of mourning.

It was a long and weary journey, at first on foot through the labyrinthine pathways that snaked through sunken crottoes and fog-haunted, venomous marshes. Reflected in turbid pools and solid-seeming shoals of mist, the sun's part of the twilight was mocking and lurid; the moon's, bleak and barren. Soon the girl's feet moved with cloven slowness and her steps began to falter. The burden in her arms seemed to encase her neck and shoulders in chains of lead.

Then the lively morning wind took her up again; it was no longer a galloping black charger that she rode, but a white winged steed, airborne, with an opalescent unicorn horn and a waving mane of cirrus cloud. Yet still the blottedch sunlight exposed to the vast sky, with its few fading, impassive stars, its dissipated weariness; and the girl bent her head away from the prurient gaze of an obese moon.

The sleepless voyeur could not follow her into the empty, comfortless chamber where, at last, she laid a flaccid puppet down upon the bed where no other had rested that night. She crossed its stiff arms over its chest and wrapped the inviolate body in its dew-drenched satin cloak. When she had brought the doll back from the dead ashes of the fireplace, the figure upon the bed had already begun to change. The face grew thinner and more delicate in outline, the hair longer and straighter, the lips fuller. As she placed the blackened, cold doll between the two crossed hands, the lifeless arms rose over the burgeoning of feminine breasts. The sunlight, overflowing the window and touching the sleeper's mouth with a faint, almost subliminal flush, completed the transformation. There alone, holding the grey child to her bosom, lay a girl in the early phases of womanhood, her hair and complexion dusky; her large jet-black eyes hooded by drooping lashes, and resting upon the gilded horizon a look of unfathomable wisdom, in which a private dimension of bitterness remained.

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It was a calm, cheerless morning in a house of desolation. A woman stood weeping quietly over the body of her daughter. The attitude of both women suggested a patient capitulation with the fates, their despotic kindred. No other sound was there in the hollowed room. No wind disturbed the dust upon the floor - a wear-layered even carpet of grey, flecked with fuliginous fragments like condensers and twisted particles of charred thread. In her profound grief, the mother half wondered what jealous god it was that had stolen her daughter's breath and carried it away upon the night-wind, to be scattered by the shifting, cloud-refracted moonbeams and never to return. Turning away in the darkness of the enclosed room, and of her own heavily veiled heart, she did not chance to hear the feeble rattling and fluttering at the closed window-shutters, like the blind erosion of balsied fingers at a key-hole whose key is rusted or whose lock is stiff.

The solitary walker had reached the summit of the hill. He paused to absorb the sober late autumnal vista, whose muted pastel colours faded indistinguishably into the dismal sky. An ethereal drizzle of chilly rain swirled around the traveller, the droplets seeping to take shape in the air. In the valleys around, a few stripped trees reached out stark limbs as though for comfort or warmth.

But the traveller felt only a deep calm and contentment. It was strange and sweet to stir on fresh grass, to feel the intimate caress of rain and the fleeting kisses of the wind. A cloudless inner sun kindled his muscles and made his drizzling curls of blonde hair into an elfin corona. He smiled and walked slowly on, shifting the silken knapsack at his shoulder. It was wonderful to drink the dews of morning and to bathe in the life-giving sunlight. To walk, after a season of lameness; to smile, after a season of rain.

An almost forgotten sorrow, more like a nostalgic imagination, deenered his thoughtful expression. Seeing the wretched dis-inherited trees, he remembered briefly the malformed creature that he had left behind; dark in the darkness, his brother still-born in the womb of the clay. That stunted Caliban was beyond all life and love; he lay in an unmarked grave, and the wanderer had dispossessed him of his burial shroud.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 36...

# The Consolations Of Horror

## Thomas Ligotti

Darkness, we welcome and embrace you

HORROR, at least in its artistic presentations, can be a comfort. And like any ceremonial initiation it may even confer - if briefly - a sense of power, wisdom, and transcendence, especially if the conferee is a willing one with a true feeling for ancient mysteries and for the kind of uncanny nastiness with which a willing heart usually invests the unknown or the half-known.

Clearly we (just the willing conferees remember) want to know the worst, both about ourselves and the world. The oldest, possibly the only theme is that of forbidden knowledge. And no forbidden knowledge ever consoled its owner. (Which is probably why it's forbidden). At best it is one of the more sardonic gifts bestowed upon the individual (for knowledge of the forbidden is first and foremost an individual ordeal). It is particularly forbidden because the mere possibility of such knowledge introduces a monstrous and perverse temptation to trade the quiet pleasures of a quiet existence for the bright lights of alienage, doom, and, in some rare cases, eternal damnation.

So we not only wish to know the worst, but to experience it as well.

Hence that arena of artificial experience of supposedly the worst kind - the horror story - where ultimate worstness may be trumped up to our soul's satisfaction, where the deck is stacked with shivers, shocks and dismembered hands for every player, and, most importantly, where one, at a safe distance, can come to grips (sort of) with death, pain, and loss in the quote real world unquote.

But does it ever work the way we would like it to?

### A Test Case

I am watching NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD for the tenth time. I see the ranks of the

dead reanimated by a double-edged marvel of the modern age (atomic radiation, I think. Or is it some wonder chemical which found its way into the water supply? And does this detail even matter?) I see a group of average, almost documentary types holed up in a house, fighting off wave after wave of the hungry ghouls. I see the group hopelessly losing their ground and succumb each one of them to the same disease as their sleepwalking attackers: A husband tries to eat his wife (or is it mother tries to eat child?), a daughter stabs her father with a gardener's trowel (or perhaps brother stabs sister with a bricklayer's trowel). In any case, they all die, and horribly. This is the important thing.

When the movie is over, I have a sense of having rung the ear-shattering changes of harrowing horror; I've got another bad one under my belt (no less than for the tenth time) which will serve to bolster my nerves for whatever shocking days and nights are to come; I have, in a phrase, an expanded capacity for fear. I can really take it!

At the movies, that is.

The fearful truth is that all of the above brutalities can be taken only too well. And then, at some point, one starts to adopt unnatural strategies to ward off not the bogey but the sand man. Talking to the characters in a horror film, for instance: Ha, Mr Decomposing Corpse lapping up a lump of sticky entrails, 'Hi! But even this tactic loses its charm after a while, especially if you're watching some 'shocker' by yourself and don't have anyone with whom to share your latest stage of jadedness and immunity to primitive fright. (At the movies I mean. Otherwise you're the same old vulnerable self.)

So after a devoted horror fan is stuffed to the gills, thoroughly sated and consequently bored - what does he (the he's traditionally outnumber the she's here) do next? Haunt the emergency rooms of hospitals

or the local morgues? Keep an eye out for the bloody mishaps on the freeway? Become a war correspondent? But now the issue has been blatantly shifted to a completely different plane - from movies to life - and clearly it doesn't belong there.

The one remedy for the horror addict's problem seems this: that if the old measure of medicine is just not strong enough - increase the dosage! (This pharmaceutical parallel is ancient but apt). And thus we have the well-known and very crude basis for the horror film's history of ever-escalating scare tactics. Already seen such standards as *WEREWOLF OF LONDON* too many times? Ample one of its gore-enriched, yet infinitely inferior versions of the early 1980's. Of course the relief is only temporary; one's tolerance to the drug tends to increase. And looking down that long open road there appears to be no ultimate druggist in sight, no final pharmacy where the horror hunger can be sluttled on a sufficiently enormous dose, where the once insatiable addict may, at last, be heaved with all the demonic dose there is, collapse with OD'd obesity into the shadows, and quietly wane: "enough."

The empty pit of boredom is ever renewing itself, while the horror films become less tantalizing to the maximally sadistic moviegoer.

And what is the common rationale for justifying what would otherwise be considered a just barely frustrated case of S or M, or both? Now we remember: to present us with horrors inside the theatre (or the books, let's not forget those) and thereby help us to assimilate the horrors on the outside, and also to ready us for the Big One. This does sound reasonable, it sounds right and rational. But none of this has anything to do with these three *7's*. "We are in the great forest of fear, where you can't fight real experiences of the worst with fake ones (no matter how well synchronized a symbolic correspondence they may have). When is the last time you heard of someone screaming himself awake from a nightmare, only to shrug it off with: "Yeah, but I've seen worse at the movies" (or read worse in the books; we'll set to them)? Nothing is worse than that high happen personally to a person. And though a bad dream may momentarily register quite high on the fright meter, it is, realistically speaking, one of the less enduring (smaller time) terrors a person is up against. Try drawing solace from your half-dozen viewing of the

Texas Chain-Saw Massacres when they're wheeling you in for brain surgery.

In all truth, framers of horror films are a jumprier, more casually hysterical class of person than most. (Statistics available on request). We need the most reassurance that we can take it as well as anyone, and we tend to be the most complacent in thinking that seventeen straight nights of supernatural-psycho films is good for the nerves and will give us a special power which non-horror-fanatics don't have. After all, this is supposed to be a major psychological selling point of the horror racket, the first among its consolations.

It is undoubtedly the first consolation, but it's also a false one.

#### Interlude: So long consolations of mayhem

Perhaps it was a mistake selecting *"I'LL EAT YOU LIVIN' DEAD* to illustrate the consolations of horror. As a delegate from Horrorland this film is admirably incorruptible, oozing integrity. It hasn't sold out to the kindergartened moral codes of most "modern horror" movies and it has no particular message to deliver: its only news is nightmare. For pure brain-chomping, nerve-chewing, sight-cursing insanity, this is a very effective work, at least the first couple of times or so. It neither tries nor pretends to be anything beyond that. (And as we have already found, nothing exists beyond that anyway, except more and more of that). But the big trouble is that sometimes we forget how much more can be done in horror movies (books too!) than that. We sometimes forget that supernatural stories - and this is very good time to boot non-supernatural ones right off the train: psycho, suspense, and the like - are capable of all the functions and feelings of real stories. For the supernatural can serve as a trusty vehicle for careening into realms where the Strange and the Familiar charge each other with the opposing poles of their passion.

*THE HAUNTING*, for example. Besides being the greatest haunted house film ever made, it is also a great haunted human one. In it the ancient spirit of mortal tragedy passes easily through walls dividing the mysteries of the mundane world from those of the extra-mundane. An this supertragic spectre never comes to rest in either one of these worlds; it never limmers long



enough to give us forbidden knowledge of the stars or ourselves, or anything else for that matter. How far can what Dr. Markway calls the derangement of Hill House be blamed on the derangement of the people who were, are, and probably will be in it? And vice versa of course. Is there something wrong with that spiral staircase in the library or just with the clumsy persons who try to climb it? The only safe bet is that something is wrong, wherever the wrongness lies... and lies and lies. Our poor quartet of nook-chasers - Dr. Markway, Theo, Luke, and Eleanor - are not only helpless to untie themselves from entangling carpet strines, they can't even find the knots!

The ghosts at Hill House always remain unseen, except in their effects: savagely bummeling enormous oak doors, bending them like cardboard; writing alliterative messages on walls ("Help Eleanor come home") with an unspecified substance ("Chalk,"

says Luke. "Or something like chalk," corrects Markway.); and in general giving the place a very bad feeling. We're not even sure who the ghosts are, or rather were. The pious and demented Hugh Crane, who built Hill House? His sinister daughter Abigail, who wasted away in Hill House? Her neglectful companion, who hung herself in Hill House? None of them emerges as a discrete, clearly definable haunter of the old mansion. Instead we have an undefined presence which seems a sort of melting pot of deranged forces from the east, an anti-America where the very poorest in spirit settle and stagnate and lose themselves in a massive and insane spectral body.

Easier to identify are the personal spectres of the living, at least for the viewer. But the characters in the film are too busy with outside things to look inside one another's houses, or even their own. Dr. Markway doesn't acknowledge Eleanor's nooks. (She loves him, homelessly). Eleanor

can't see Theo's snooks (she's a lesbian) and Theo avoids dwelling on her own. ("And what are you afraid of, Theo?" asks Eleanor, "of knowing what I really want," she replies, somehow uncandidly). Best of all though is Luke, who doesn't think there are even any snooks, until near the end of the film when this engaging but trivial fun-seeker finds a new awareness of the alienation, perversity, and strangeness of the world around him. "It should be burned to the ground," he says of the high-priced house he is to inherit, "and the earth sown with salt." This quasi-biblical quote indicates that more than a few doors have been kicked down in Luke's private cassagewawa. He knows now! Poor Eleanor, of course, has been claimed by the house as one of its lonely, faceless citizens of eternity. It is her voice that gets to deliver the reverberant last lines of the film: "Hill House has stood for eighty years and will probably stand for eighty more... but whatever walks there, walks alone." With these words the viewer glimpses a realm of unimaginable pain and horror, an unfathomable region of aching Gothic turmoil, a weird nevermoresville.

The experience is extremely disconsoling but nonetheless exhilarating, and every time.

But for a movie to convey such intense feeling for the supernatural is rare. (This one of course is a scrupulously faithful adaptation of Shirley Jackson's unarguably excellent novel). The thing that is quite common, especially with fiction, is the phenomenon that produced the single-sentence paragraph above, in other words - the horror story's paradox of entertainment. The thumping heart of the question, though, is what really entertains us? In opposition, that is, to what we imagine entertains us. Entertainment, whatever we imagine its real source, is rightly regarded as its own justification, and this seems to be one of the unassailible consolations of horror.

Is it, though? (This won't take long).

#### Another Test Case

We are reading - in a quiet, cozy room, it goes without saying - one of H. R. James' powerful ghost stories. It is 'Count Magnus', in which a curious scholar gains knowledge he didn't even know was forbidden and suffers the resultant doom at the hands of the count and his tentacled companion. The story

actually ends before we have a chance to see it, but we know that a sucked-off face is in store for our scholar. Meanwhile we sit on the sidelines (sipping a warm drink, probably) as the doomed academic meets a fate worse than any we'll ever know. At least we think it's worse, we hope it is... deep, deep in the unfinished sub-cellars of our minds we pray: "Please don't let anything even like that happen to me! Not to me. Let it always be the other guy and I'll read about him, even tremble for him a little. Besides, I'm having so much fun, it can't be all that terrible. For him, that is. For me it would be unbearable. See how shaky and excitable I get just reading about it. So please let it always be the other guy."

But it can't always be the other guy, for in the long run, we're all, each of us, the other guy.

Of course in the short run it's one of life's minor ecstasies - an undoubted entertainment - to read about a world in which the very worst doom take place in a restricted area we'd never ever wander into and befalls somebody else. And this is the run in which all stories are read, as well as written. (If something with eyes like two runny eggs were after your carcass, would you sit down and write a story about it?) It's another world, the short run. It's a world where horror really is a true consolation. But it's no compliment to Dr. James or to ourselves as readers to put too much stock in ghost stories as a consolation for our mortality, our vulnerability to the terror of real-life terrors. As consolations go, this happens to be a pretty low-grade one; rather like giggling with demented complacency over the obits of people who might have died if only they had existed in the first place.

So our second consolation lives on borrowed time at best. And in the long-run where no mere tale can do you much good - is delusory.

(Perhaps the stories of H. P. Lovecraft offer a more threatening and admirable role to those of us devoted to doom. In Lovecraft's work doom is not restricted to eccentric characters in eccentric situations. It begins there but ultimately expands to violate the safety zone of the reader (and the non-reader for that matter, though the latter remains innocent of Lovecraft's forbidden knowledge). H. R. James' are cautionary tales, lessons in how

to stay out of spectral trouble and how nice and safe it feels to do so. But within the cosmic boundaries of Lovecraft's universe, which many would call the universe itself, we are already in trouble, and feeling safe is out of the question for anyone with a few brains and a chance access to the manuscripts of Albert Wilmarth, Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, or Prof. Ansell's meschew. These isolated narrators take us with them into their doom, which is the world's. (No one ever gives a hoot what happens to Lovecraft's characters as individuals). If we knew what they knew about the world and about our alarmingly tentative place in it, our brains would indeed reel with the revelation. And if we found out what Arthur Jermyn found out about ourselves and our humble origins in a mere madness of biology, we would do as he did with a few gallons of gasoline and a merciful match. Of course Lovecraft insists on telling us things it does no good to know: things that can't help us or protect us or even prepare us for the awful and inevitable apocalypse to come. The only comfort is to accept it, live in it, and sigh yourself into the balm of living oblivion. If you can only maintain this constant sense of doom, you may be spared the pain of foolish hopes and their imminent demolition.

But we can't maintain it; only a saint of doom could. Hope leaks into our lives by way of snreasing cracks we always meant to repair but never got around to. Oddly enough, when the cracks yawn their widest, and the promised deluge comes at last, it is not hope at all that finally breaks through any drowns us).

#### Interlude:

See you later, consolations of doom

So when a fictional state of absolute doom no longer offers us possibilities of comfort - what's left? Well, another stock role casts one not as the victim of a horror story but as the villain in it. That is, we get to be the monster for a chance. To a certain extent this is supposed to happen when we walk onto those resounding floorboards behind the Gothic footlights. It's traditional to identify with and feel sorry for the vampire or the werewolf in their ultimate moment of weakness, a time when they're most human. Sometimes, though, it seems as if there's much fun to be had playing a vampire or werewolf at the height of each's monstrous, people-maiming power.

To play them in our hearts, I mean. After all, it could be kind of great to wake up at dusk every day and cruise around in the shadows and fly on batwings through the night, stare strange girls in the eve and have them under your power. Not bad for someone who's supposed to be dead. Or rather, for someone who can't die and whose soul is not his own; for someone who - no matter how seemingly suave - is doomed to ride eternity with a single and highly embarrassing obsession, the most debased junkie immortalized. As we might guess, junkies never really have a good time.

But maybe you could make it as a werewolf. For most of a given month you're just like anybody else. Then for a few days you can take a vacation from your puny human self and spill the blood of puny human others. Then you return to your original clothes size and no one is any the wiser... until next month rolls around and you've got to do the whole thine again, month after month, over and over. Still, the werewolf's lifestyle might not be so bad, as long as you don't yet caught killing someone you hate, which is expected of a werewolf, or someone you love, which is really expected. Neither should we forget that there might be some guilt involved and, yes, bad dreams.

Vamirism and lycanthropy do have their drawbacks, anyone would admit that. But there would also be some memorable moments too, moments humans rarely if ever have: feeling your primal self at one with the inhuman forces around you, fearless in the face of night and nature and solitude and all those things from which mere people have much to fear. There you are under the moon - a raging storm in human form. And you'll always be like that, forever if you're careful. Being a human being is a dead end anyway. It would seem that supernatural sociopaths have more possibilities open to them. So wouldn't it be great to be one? What I mean, of course, is: is it a consolation of horror fiction to let us be one for a little while? Yeah, it really is; the attractions of this life are sometimes irresistible. But are we missing some point if we only see the glamour and ignore the drudgery in the existence of these freespirited noctomiles? Well, are we?

#### The Last Test

Test cancelled. The consolation is

patently a trick one, done with invisible writing, mirrors and camera magic.

Substitute consolation:  
'The Fall of the House of Usher,  
or Doom Revisited'

Did you ever wonder how a Gothic story like this can be so great without enlisting the reader's care for its characters' doom? Plenty of horrible events and concepts are woven together; the narrator and his friend Roderick experience a fair amount of FEAR (once in all caps, as shown). But unlike a horror story whose effect depends on reader sympathy with its fictional victims, this one doesn't want us to get involved with the characters in that way. Our fear does not derive from theirs. Though Roderick, his sister, and the visiting narrator are fascinating companions, they do not burden us with their individual catastrophes. Are we sad for Roderick's and his sister's terrible fate? No. Are we happy the narrator makes a safe flight from the sinking house? Not particularly. Then why get upset about this calamity which takes place in the backwoods, miles from the nearest town and everyday human concerns.

In this masterpiece individuals are not the issue. Everywhere in Poe's literary universe (Lovecraft's too) the individual is horribly and comfortingly irrelevant. During the reading of 'The Fall of the House of Usher' we don't look over any particular character's shoulder but we have our attention distributed godzwise into every corner of a foul factory which manufactures only one product: total and inescapable doom. Whether a given proper noun escapes or is caught on a given occasion is beside the point. This is a world created with built-in obsolescence and to appreciate fully this downrunning cosmos one must take the perspective of its creator, which is all perspectives without getting sidetracked into a single one. Therefore we as readers are the House of Usher (both family and structure), we are the fungi clustering across its walls and the violent storm over its ancient head; we sink with the Ushers and ret away with the narrator. In brief, we play all the roles. And the consolation in this is that we are supremely removed from the maddeningly tragic viewpoint of the human.

Of course, when the story is over we must fall from our god's perch and sink

back into humanness, which is perhaps what the Ushers and their house are doing. This is always a problem for would-be gods! We can't maintain for very long a godlike point of view. Wouldn't it be great if we could; if life could be lived outside the agony of the individual? But we are always doomed and redoomed to become involved with our own lives, which is the only life there is, and godlikeness has nothing at all to do with it.

But still, wouldn't it be great...

Darkness, you've done a lot for us

At this point it may seem that the consolations of horror are not what we thought they were, that all this time we've been keeping company with illusions. Well, we have. And we'll continue to do so, continue to seek the appalling scene which short-circuits our brain, continue to sit in our numb coziness with a book of terror on our lap like a cataleptic predator, and continue to draw smug solace, if only for the space of a story, from a world made smug and simple by absolute hopelessness and doom. These consolations are still effective, even if they don't work as well as we would prefer them to. But they are only effective, like most things of value in art or life, as illusions. And there's no point attributing to them powers of therapy or salvation they don't and can't have. There are enough disappointments in the world without adding that one.

Perhaps, though, our illusion of consolation could be enhanced by acquiring a better sense of what we are being consoled by. What, in fact, is a horror story? And what does it do? First the latter.

The horror story does the work of a certain kind of dream we all know. Sometimes it does this so well that even the most irrational and unlikely subject matter can infect the reader with a sense of realism beyond the realistic, a trick usually not seen outside the vaudeville of sleep. When is the last time you failed to be fooled by a nightmare, didn't suspend disbelief because it wasn't sufficiently true-to-life? The horror story is only true to dreams, especially those which involve us in mysterious ordeals, the passing of secrets, the passages of forbidden knowledge, and, in more ways than two, the snilling of guts.

What distinguishes horror from other

kinds of stories is the exclusive devotion of their practitioners, their true practitioners and not the fakes and opportunists, to self-consciously imagining and isolating the most demonic aspects and episodes of human existence, undiminished by any consolation whatever. For here no consolation on earth is sufficient to the horrors it will struggle in vain to make bearable.

Are horror stories truer than other stories? They may be, but not necessarily. They are limited to depicting conditions of extraordinary suffering, and while this is not the only game on the block, I don't think these depictions are essentially lies. After all, what single fictional horror - no matter how grossly magnified - can ever hold a candle to the complex mesh of misery and disenchantment which is merely the human routine? Of course the fundamental horror of existence is not always apparent to us, its constantly menaced but unwary existers. But in true horror stories we can see it even in the dark. All eternal hopes, optimistic outs, and ultimate redemptions are cleared away, and for a little while we can pretend to stare the very worst right in its rotting face.

Why, though? Why?

Just to do it, that's all. Just to see how much unmitigated weirdness, sorrow, desolation, and cosmic anxiety the human heart can take and still have enough heart left over to translate these agonies into artistic forms: James' stained-glass monstrosities, Lovecraft's narrow-passaged blasphemies, Poe's symphonic paranoia. As in any satisfying relationship, the creator of horror and its consumer approach oneness with each other. In other words, you get the horrors you deserve, those you can understand. For contrary to conventional wisdom, you cannot be frightened by what you don't understand.

This, then, is the ultimate, that is only, consolation: simply that someone shares some of your own feelings and has made of these a work of art which you have the insight, sensitivity, and - like or not - peculiar set of experiences to appreciate. Amazing thing to say, the consolation of horror in art is that it actually intensifies our sense of sorrow, loudens it on the sounding-board of our horror-hollowed hearts, turns terror up full blast, all the while reaching for that perfect and deafening amplitude at which we may dance to the bizarre music of our own misery.

## Absence

### Joel Lane

By the pervading dawn I knew the long night past,  
Yet dared not prove in truth the dream's deception fled  
Back to the vaults of memory; I had dreamed you dead,  
Had almost seen it, erewhile, in the sky overcast,  
The sickly shadows swallowed by mist at the last,  
The moribund evening and the clouds bleeding red.  
The night wind snatched away the purple bloom that bled  
Peace on my eyelids, and my bare eyes stared aghast  
Into the pearl of a pale, painful world of day  
Where daylight's living colours all had leached away  
Into the weaveless fabric of night's sombre shade;  
And your eyes were dull; unstrirring, your lips were grey;  
Then the cold rain fell hard like a sharp-edged blade  
Upon my bent neck as I knelt alone and prayed.

# BEYOND THIS HORIZON

## READERS' LETTERS

From: MIK MORTON (Fareham, Hants):

It will be interesting to see the response to DH26 - I like it. Whilst agreeing that articles should grace the pages, too, I must admit to preferring to see more fiction.

I'm not sure about Billy Wolfenbarger's 'The Attic'. Are we experiencing the attic of Bowen's drug-ravaged mind, or a miscellany of flashbacks, or images, of kickback traces of addiction? The prose is dense and repays re-reading; in fact, having followed that endorsement myself I find myself cutting this story first. David 'Alpassa's 'Mr Proudy's Gnome' is deserving of first, too, for different reasons: within the few words there is realised a fleshed-out character, and a neat, appropriate twist. 'The Shadow by the Altar' by David Riley contained good atmospheric description, only the end being flawed by an excess of gore. But, again, a well-realised character and environment. Just pipped, then, was Ramsey Campbell's 'Jack in the Box', in which the evocation of the vampire's thirst for blood is carried off well, though the end, to me, was dissatisfying.

Peter Wild's 'Tan Lin' contained some good fantasy images with fresh-seeming metaphors; but the heroine, the dreamer, the fantasy-weaver, is less distinct, less real than her dreams; good effect that, of course, but I felt she needed more balance. And why was the boy-friend/lover in denim so anery? (The fact that these questions are asked is a compliment, however).

Kelvin Jones's Holmes/Pons pastiche was nicely done. Yet it is safe in comparison with Derleth's Solar Pons: the fanger with pastiches is that they owe too much to the original and lack freshness. Somehow, Derleth overcame this: Pons was not just Holmes with another name, he became a character in his own right. Even so, there is potential for Sheridan Carter to do likewise; more description, like that on page 21, would help.

Ramsey Campbell's 'Bait' was standard fare, well done, though the denouement seemed too contrived and detracted from the creeping horror so carefully achieved in true Campbell tradition.

On the whole, I think Philip Collins (letters) need have no reservations about an all-fiction issue. Though I must men-

tion 'The Sorcerer's Revenge' by Tom Morris: it showed how not to write an opening paraenraoh; it is too convoluted, gets in the way of the picture it is creating. A pity, as there are some serie touches to the tale.

From: PHILIP COLLINS (Levton, London):

As a one-off all fiction issue I thought it (DH26) a good, successful, above average collection of stories.

As for the 'best-piece-in-the-issue-award', I must award it to the letter in 'Beyond This Horizon' written by Philip Collins. The wit and erudition of this obviously wonderfully talented writer are ...

All right, I suppose I can't really get away with that one can I? My real vote for best story goes to 'Jack in the Box' by Ramsey Campbell. I recently read his collection DARK COMPANIONS and for me 'Jack in the Box' was better than any one of at least half the stories in that collection. The continual near chanting of the single word 'red' was particularly striking.

Second place would have to be 'The Shadow by the Altar' by David Riley. Its casual style, slang dialogue and 'everyday' settings made the 'unreal' events all the more effective and horrifying.

I'm afraid I can't place 'The Weird of Caxton' by Kelvin Jones any higher than third, despite it being great fun. It was after all a pastiche of another's writer, and although such things can be very enjoyable, a pastiche by definition is not an entirely original story.

The standard of artwork in the issue I thought was very high, and I can't in all fairness single out a single drawing or artist for special praise without unfairly omitting others. So instead I'll just moan about the horrendous front cover drawn by Graham Crossland and Ian Hicks. It was sexist. It was ludicrous. It was *veuich!* Those last three comments I feel also apply to 'Tan Lin' by Peter Wild.

The issue was of course variable in quality, it could not possibly be any other way. For me the good bits far outweigh the bad which means for me a good issue.

From: JOEL LINE ('Macclesfield):

Philip Collins' remark in the letters

section of 94% about the inevitable limitations of an all-fiction issue is very pertinent, but the increase in page-count made quite a difference and the stories were well selected for their density and the liveliness of their ideas.

To select the three best of any group of stories that is so varied in style and fairly consistent in quality is an unproductive exercise, since it disregards the fact that different stories have different aims - it's almost as banal as awarding marks out of ten. However, I think that three pieces (in no particular order) did perhaps stand out. 'The Attic' by Billy Wolfenbarger is one of those rare pieces on the border of the fantasy genre that uses the supernatural to reinforce a mood rather than the other way around; the substance of the character's visions is less important than the way in which they indicate an interweaving of multiple planes of experience. Despite the absence of plot and the familiarity - perhaps intentional? - of many images, the story follows a course of relentless though invisible purpose; written by and about a poet, it explores the working of poetic creativity and evokes the poet's sense of defeat with that of the person thwarted by experience of life. This is a theme used by many poets - for instance, by William Empson: "It is the poems we have lost, the illus / from missing dates, at which the heart excites." Ray Bowe literally experiences the loss of poems and periods of time, and the only source of continuity in his fragmented life - a past symbolised of course, by the series of neglected boxes - is the weaving of cobwebs and rain, the tapestry of the story itself, in which the spiders, the "motes of consciousness" given life and purpose, are poems, raindrops or tears that can "never stop" because they are the only possible affirmation of life. It is the demand of the "unwritten poem" that perpetuates the entire process: the true horror comes when one sees that this is a vicious circle...

'Tarn Lin' by Peter Wild also employs cleverly the idea of multiple dimensions. The particular charm of this story lies in the pace of its development: it is always one step ahead of the reader, and thus the lyrical style never loses momentum, becoming sentimental. However, the ending is rather artificial and has no apparent justification. David Pilev's 'The Shadow by the Altar' is powerful despite the absence of any element of surprise: its mood of harsh unease is sustained relentlessly.

Of the poems, Terri Beckett's was particularly interesting, exploring its premise thoroughly and with much insight. The artwork was quite phenomenal both in quality and in quantity, all of our regular artists being in good form and the newcomers Ian Hicks and Graham Crossland providing work not only skilful but highly imaginative in its own right. Their beautiful piece on page 40, Dave Carson's exceptionally hideous illustration for 'Bait' and Alan Hunter's sombre representation of 'The Attic' were perhaps outstanding; the issue is really as much a special art as fiction issue.

From NIC HOWARD (Reading):

Many thanks for the latest 'Dark Horizons'. It was like reading an extra issue of 'Fantasy Tales'! Apart from Peter Wild's 'Tarn Lin' and Billy Wolfenbarger's 'The Attic', all the stories seemed to have a curious light-weight quality about them. They were really rather bland. David Malpass' 'Mr Proudy's Gnome' was amusing, and the other stories - particularly Ramsey Campbell's two, and Tom Morris' 'The Sorcerer's Revenge' - were atmospheric and horrible, but that's as far as it goes.

Win some, lose some! I did enjoy DH. It was gratifying, amusing and educational to read the comments on my article in DH 25. Gratifying: Some people did actually read it and feel moved to comment. Thanks. Amusing: 'Hm. Maybe Brian Frost's invocation of the wrath of Great Cthulhu against this traitor to the Cause is a little too strong. Nobody deserves that... but of course, we all know it's just fantasy, isn't it? Maybe one day Brian will get a bloodstained, torn piece of paper along with a covering note from my solicitors telling him that it was the last thing ever to come from my pen!' Educational: Brian's comments again. I still believe that Derleth's stories are entertaining - it just shows that different people's tastes are different. It's a game that has no ending. And Derleth is a better writer than Lovecraft - not in the domain of the macabre, but overall (as I said in my article. Useful context). His best novels, stories and journals are written with such an insight into human nature, as well as plain literary talent, that HPL is a virtual non-starter. But they were too totally different people. And this is a game that has no ending!

From DALLAS COFFIN (Hunstanton, Norfolk):

Compliments are certainly due you and the individual authors and artists concerned for the splendid DH26. I read my copy through in a single afternoon and evening - not the recommended way to do justice to a collection of tales, but I think it testifies to how compelling the mag was.

For my part, Ramsey Campbell's 'Bait' takes the prize; a thoroughly ghastly little gem, with a closing sentence that nulls no punches. Subplemented by Dave Carson's excellent illustration, it had to be a winner. My second favorite, I think, is 'The Shadow by the Altar' - a traditional theme, as you rightly say, but elevated above many other varns of this sort by Rilev's marvellous graphic prose. Again, Dave Carson produces hideously gratifying illo. As a third choice, I'll opt for 'or' 'Morrie' 'The Sorcerer's Revenge'. Interesting to see a reversal of conventional sword and sorcery, with a 'cooish northern barbarian' becoming necromantically enslaved to a warlock, instead of hacking him apart with a broadsword or something.

I also enjoyed 'The Attic' immensely. It could perhaps be critisized as too mainstream for a fantasy mag... but then, so was 'The Dark Country' in 'Fantasy Tales' - and that certainly went far. Whatever, Wolfenbarger uses some tremendous imagery and there is no denying that the story is haunting. 'Ir' 'Troyd's Gnome' and 'Tam Lin' were both very original in their use of folklore, the latter highlighted by a rather beautiful illustration.

Artwork? After the sparsely illustrated DH25, this is a truly lavish number. Graham Crossland and Ian Hicks are a tremendous asset, contributing some wonderfully mystical material. The front cover is especially delightful, although the title logo looks a bit squashed and some of the effect of that whatever-it-is lurking behind the attractive plumed lady is lost.

From: ANTHONY MATTHEWS (West Bromwich):

Perhaps every other issue could be done in this way (all-fiction) as the stories themselves (and of course the poetry) are the life-springs of the entire genre. Is not new material as deserving of the critic's scalpel as old? Without a joint to carve, no-one gets a meal. Having said that, I found non-fiction items in previous issues well-researched, informative and highly readable.

'The Shadow by the Altar' was my number one choice. David Rilev's description of the nightmare elemental perceptible only

by movements of its shadow were disturbing. Number two was 'Bait'. The good 'ir. Campbell's little chiller was quite palatable, with its clever revenge motif. A better read than 'Jack in the Box'. 'The Sorcerer's Revenge' came a worthy third. It was realistically crafted, evoking a feeling of days of yore. Poor old Santil suffered for everyone's sins.

Of the poetry, 'Invocation' was the most memorable. Jon Bve's 'The Promise' was a little too short. It did not fulfil expectations after the previous 'Revelations' a haunting piece of shocking imagery, featured in DH25.

From PIONA JEFFREY (Nottingham):

As far as I'm concerned, last issue's all-fiction basis was definitely a good idea, with all the stories having something to offer, even if some of them were overtaken by the shadow of triteness.

Billy Wolfenbarger's 'The Attic' stood out because, pulsing with sinister unease, it wasn't trying too hard to be a fantasy/horror story. The construction seemed a little wavery, but at least it avoided seeming laboured, and attained an naturalistic atmosphere as the sometime self-conscious style would allow.

The story that takes my second nomination is 'The Shadow by the Altar'. The occult aspects didn't really frighten - I always feel that a powerful degree of stylisation is helpful to communicate that necessary aura of otherness - but the crisp urban treatment more than made up for this. Tippet's characterisation, developed in an unassuming and steady manner, is a piece of craftsmanship. Touches like "Art didn't impress him, especially this kind of grisly nonsense", really helped to bring the character to life without belabouring the point, and plenty of description gives the reader a fuller perception of the scenes than any of the other stories offered.

My final choice would be the first story, 'Jack in the Box' which, despite the aforementioned overhanging shadow, blusters through any narrative problems with the help of a forcefulness of image and a sounding, head-on style involving frequent repetition which seems to work well as a substitute for innovation.

The other story which deserves a mention even though the problems it raises remain unsolved, is 'Tam Lin'. Obviously it belongs to that little sub-genre of stories originating in folk/fairy tales, and, as such, is allegory. The juxtaposition of now and then, i.e., on the whole, a good idea, but the nov lacks a sense of scintillating magic, and

the then doesn't quite make it either; they are neither sufficiently contrasting nor sufficiently of a whole to exist next to each other successfully.

There were some very good moments - imaginative metaphors and so forth, and the hurried structure of the sentences at certain points - but generally the metrical quality that writing hoping to be called lyrical should possess isn't there; the

dition often lances into predictability, or gets pushed away behind all other considerations when the very sounds of the words should be working towards that magical atmosphere that the events begin to suggest. Nonetheless there's something in there, delicate and beautiful, and in need of tending, that could be worth all the 'Buried Alive's', 'Chambling Thing From Beyond's' and 'Northern Barbarian's' put together.

#### THE GOD OF CLAY (Continued from p.25)

bearing away that last comfort of the abandoned one as a sack for his journey.'And something else the monster had lost: the other had taken his eyes for lanterns. For they were flaming gems of the earth's core, those eyes; they could light a pathway through the night with their red lustre, when the wayfarer's laughing blue eyes

could not see.

Yet fear and a secret shame would come to the traveller in the black vacuum of midnight, as he guarded his stolen sparks from invisible visitors of vengeance; and saw, when he held up the twin lanterns to his own face, the ghostly lashes that made them flicker, the ghostly tears that made them dim.

## The Fairy Hills

### Susan Tannahill

I asked my lady fair  
O whither does she go.  
She said, "To the Fairy Hills  
Where the music ever flows."

I said to my lady fair,  
"There's death in the Fairy Hills  
The music's only heard  
When the heart of life is still."

My lady turned and smiled,  
The stars were in her eyes.  
"It is not death I'll find  
It's the music," she replied.

The wind grew cool as my lady fair  
Walked the heather to the hills.  
Her hair was bright, her walk was light  
And she came to the Fairy Hills.

I have not seen my lady fair  
Ere again these lonely years.  
Still I hear her voice in the Fairy Winds  
"O won't you, love, draw near?"

To the Fairy Hills for my lady fair  
I ride my milk white mare.  
My soul is free in a Fairy song  
And my love is standing there.



Hunter

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